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Degree Zero Art:
Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica

Lara Demori

History of Art, Ph.D.
The University of Edinburgh
2017

Declaration

The following thesis has been composed by myself and the work contained within it is entirely my own. 10% of the material included in Chapter Three has been published as Lara Demori, “Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolé* capes: an anti-art will to cultural zero,” *L’Uomo Nero* 13 (2016): 131-142.

Lara Demori

Date: 28/02/2017

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to unfold the concept of the ‘degree zero art’ as an artistic and cultural project as manifested in the practices of two very different artists, Milan-based Piero Manzoni (Soncino 1933- Milan 1963) and Rio-born Hélio Oiticica (Rio de Janeiro 1937-1980), during the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the clear contrasts between their works and their very different cultural formations, the thesis focuses on these artists in order to show how their practices align around the challenge to aesthetic categories, stylistic labels and political frameworks employed by much recent critical literature. In order to discuss intellectual and critical structures developed to narrate varieties of North American conceptual practices, this thesis proposes a new interpretative frame: a ‘degree zero aesthetics’, creating a transnational dialogue between the work of Manzoni and Oiticica. Borrowing from the understanding of zero proposed by the German Zero group at the beginning of the sixties, I argue that the idea of zero denotes a fresh start and constructive will; it therefore explains the process of erasing and rebuilding from scratch that has characterised the post-war generation. Alongside the process of construing an aesthetic around the notion of ‘zero’, this thesis aims to deconstruct popular sites of discourse around the tropes of ‘participation’ and ‘politics’, critically readdressing the historiography surrounding these themes. Lastly, this project attempts to discuss the literature on both artists, who have become paradigmatic of certain key movements and moments in Latin American and European art respectively, and in recent elaborations of global art histories.

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Note to translation

This thesis includes a considerable number of unpublished texts that I have translated either from Portuguese or from Italian. Hélio Oiticica's writings are referenced as AHO/PHO (Arquivo Hélio Oiticica/Projeto Hélio Oiticica) an online digital archive available at www.itaucultural/programaho that contains scanned original documents. Newspaper articles quoted in this thesis have been studied in their original formats at the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro and of the Museum of Modern Art, São Paulo, at the Biblioteca Comunale Centrale and at the Biblioteca d'Arte, Milan.

Introduction

1. Literature review

From the beginning we looked upon the term [Zero] not as an expression of nihilism – or as a Dada-like gag, but as a word indicating a zone of silence and of pure possibilities for a new beginning as the count down when rockets take off – ZERO is the incommensurable zone in which the old state turns into the new.¹

Hélio Oiticica (Rio de Janeiro, 1937-1980) [fig. 01] and Piero Manzoni (Soncino, 1933 – Milano, 1963) [fig. 02], the two artists on whom this thesis focuses, held strikingly similar attitudes towards their early work:

I refuse to discuss what has been done before 1958.²
There's no reason to take seriously my pre-'59 production.³

In 1959 there was a significant change of direction in both artists' production: each shifted from one process of making to another in a way that challenged earlier assumptions about their work. Yet of course this in itself does not suggest that juxtaposing artists from such different backgrounds, working in different national contexts, is compelling. This thesis aims not to suggest that they entered into any concrete exchange of ideas or worked together consciously at any point. Rather, by setting these two artists alongside each other, I want to explore in a novel and productive fashion the theoretical and artistic possibilities that irrupted in the 1960s. Looking at two figures whose practices were necessarily distanced from Anglo-American avant-gardism means opening up questions about what, for example, a conceptual or performative strategy might mean. Among other things, I want to argue that, in undertaking such a radical revision of their approach in the early 1960s,

¹ Otto Piene, "The development of the Group Zero," *Times Literary Supplement* (1964): 3.

² Piero Manzoni quoted in a letter from Hans Sonnenberg (Rotterdam) to Enrico Castellani (Milano), February 12, 1963 (unpublished). Courtesy of Piero Manzoni foundation.

³ Hélio Oiticica, "Metasquemas 57/58," in *Hélio Oiticica-Metasquemas* (Galeria Ralph Camargo: São Paulo, 1972).

Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice critically questioned aesthetic categories, stylistic labels, existing critical discourses and indeed offers opportunities to rethink current critical debates. Their 'radical leap' eschews a fixed interpretation and instead encourages multiple possible readings.⁴ Their subject matter and style also problematize the tendency to think in terms of a 'local' and 'global' binary opposition, thus causing tension between native and international influences. In view of the artists' similar critical attitudes, their shared imaginative disposition and subversive standpoints, the simultaneous analysis of their work undertaken by this thesis creates, I argue, a thought-provoking transnational conversation, which I frame through the provocative concept that arises in different senses in the careers and ideas of both artists, of a 'zero' art.

The dialogue emerging from pairing Manzoni and Oiticica manifests the twofold aim of this project: firstly to shed new light on their practices and enrich current theoretical narratives by proposing a new interpretative frame; secondly to discuss, through the lens of their oeuvre, the tropes of 'participation' and 'politics' that have dominated art-historical literature over the last fifty years. Lastly, this thesis aims to a historiographical reappraisal of their work based upon the examination of primary sources, whenever possible, and questioning some secondary literature. The volume of literature on both Oiticica and Manzoni has dramatically increased in the last fifteen years: it is therefore necessary to evaluate its development, from the artists' death until now. In the next section I am going to offer a detailed critical review of the literature I refer to in this project, setting out along the way the key questions that are at stake in the dissertation.

1.1 Hélio Oiticica

Reviewing the literature on Oiticica is not an easy task: after a few years of silence from the international art scene, the historiographical reappraisal of his work started off with a series of posthumous exhibitions. Therefore in this section I shall discuss the material in chronological order, beginning with the evaluation of recent

⁴ The term 'radical leap' was coined by Guy Brett to qualify the changes undertaken by the work of Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape. See Michael Asbury, "Hélio Couldn't Dance," in Paula Braga,

catalogues and of the generic literature on Latin American modern and contemporary art. I shall then move on to consider articles and monographs, emphasising the shift in tenor and the increasing importance given to this artist.

The rediscovery of Oiticica's work began with the major retrospective at the Witte de With center for contemporary art in Rotterdam (February 22 – April 26, 1992) – an exhibition that travelled to the Galerie nationale de Jeu de Paume in Paris, the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, the Centro de Arte Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbekian, Lisbon, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and finally the Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of an extensive catalogue, containing the English translation of some of Oiticica's writings and some insightful essays by Guy Brett, Haroldo de Campos, Waly Salomão and Catherine David. After this show, Oiticica's international recognition reached its apex with the retrospective *Hélio Oiticica: the Body of Colour*, 2007, curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez and organised by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in collaboration with Tate Modern. The catalogue (and related exhibition) focused on Oiticica's relation to 'colour', a key element in his practice throughout his career. The show included diverse series of works: the *Grupo Frente* (1955-1956), *Sêcos* (1956-57), *Metaesquemas* (1957-58), *White Series* (1958-59), *Bilaterals* (1959), *Spatial Reliefs* (1960), *Inventions* (1959-62), *Nuclei* (1960-63), *Bólides* (1963-67), *Parangolés* (1964-68), *Appropriations* (1966-80), *Topological Ready-Made Landscapes* (1978-79), *Invention of Colour* (1978). Notably, *Appropriations* and *Topological Ready-Made Landscapes* had hardly been shown or reflected upon before – or indeed since. However, both the catalogue and the exhibition left out the *Cosmococas-program in progress*, multimedia installations the artist realised in New York, thus inaugurating the reception of these works as in some way exceptional, or at least fundamentally different. Carmen Ramírez defined the periods Oiticica's spent abroad in London and New York as 'self-exile' and she thus unwillingly contributed to the claim that Oiticica was a 'marginal artist' – although recognising the national and international reputation he enjoyed.⁵

ed., *Fios Soltos: a Arte de Hélio Oiticica* (Perspectiva: São Paulo, 2007).

⁵ Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Hélio Oiticica: the Body of Colour* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 17-18.

Carmen Ramírez has had an important role in framing the critical debate on Oiticica and on Latin American art. In 2004, together with Héctor Olea, she curated the famous exhibition ‘Inverted Utopias: Avant-garde Art in Latin America’ (catalogue published by Yale University Press in collaboration with Museum of Fine arts, Houston) that aimed to rescue Latin American Art from a peripheral position in relation to European modern art. The authors argued that Latin American practices enacted a series of inversions in respect to the European avant-gardes. Attempting to avoid the teleological model of art history, they proposed to cluster Latin American artists and movements following the construct of constellations, a model they grounded in Theodor W. Adorno’s dialectical thought. The six constellations proposed were: ‘Universal and Vernacular’, ‘Play and Grief’, ‘Progression and Rupture’, ‘Vibrational and Stationary’, ‘Touch and Gaze’ and ‘Cryptic and Committed’; each constellation ‘represented an open and porous site of tensions’, grouping disparate artists and movements.⁶ I criticise at length this curatorial approach in chapter 2 of this thesis. The catalogue had however the merit of publishing in English language several unpublished manuscripts, manifestos, letters, excerpts from newspaper’s articles, journals, reviews and artists’ books. The project of publishing hitherto unpublished documents, most importantly primary sources, of Latin American art and culture continued with the volume *Resisting categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (Mari Carmen Ramírez, et al., eds., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), an exceptional book that had a great impact on the reception of, and research on, Latin American art. Mari Carmen Ramírez participated also in the catalogue *Vivências. Life experience* (exhibition held at the Generali Foundation, Wien, 2000) that emphasised the specific focus on “art and life” in the practice of some major Latin American artists, Hélio Oiticica among others, and their shift towards a closer relationship to the audience.

Artist and art critic Luis Camnitzer has made a significant contribution to the history of Latin American Art of the sixties and seventies, and his books inform greatly my discussion in chapter 2 of some fundamental tropes recurring in Latin American modern and contemporary practices. In *Conceptualism in Latin American*

⁶ Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press), xvii.

Art: Didactics of Liberation (University of Texas Press, 2007) Camnitzer defines the differences between western *Conceptualism*, explained as a reflection on the art system and the institution, and Latin American *Conceptual Art*, strongly grounded in its socio-political background and therefore understood as a political tool with a pedagogical intent. Camnitzer also sets out a distinction in the terminology to be used to describe the two phenomena, considering Latin American Art as autonomous in its own right and not as derived from western practices and ideologies. In *Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias* (University of Texas Press, 2009), Camnitzer touches upon similar themes – artistic colonialism, diasporas and so forth – but the discussion is structured in the format of forty essays written at different times of his career and therefore presenting a less cohesive and a more autobiographical picture.

Another important contribution to the field of Latin American art is given by scholar Monica Amor, who discusses the shift in tenor that affected the work of art across Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela in between 1944 and 1969. *Theories of the Nonobject* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) displays a series of case studies that deal with the reconceptualization of the art object following Ferreira Gullar's famous manifesto 'Theories of the non-object' published in the 'Suplemento Domenical do Jornal do Brasil' in 1959. Among the case studies, Amor pays specific attention to Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Gego, discussing how they took up and challenged the legacy of modernism.⁷

⁷ Parts of the book had been already published in the form of two articles: 'From Work to Frame, In Between and Beyond: Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica's Work, 1959-1964, *Grey Room* 38 (2010): 20-37, 'Another Geometry: Gego's Reticulárea, 1969-1982,' *October* 113 (2005): 102-125.

What Ramírez, Olea, Camnitzer, Amor and scholars that have been writing about Latin American modern and contemporary art in the last twenty years have in common is the necessity of emancipating Latin American artists and movements from a peripheral zone and a status of dependency upon ‘western’ (meaning the axis Paris-New York) historiography.⁸ In doing so, they aim to provide the reader with tools for a broader understanding, offering an alternative terminology able to express contradictions, paradoxes and socio-political specificities in which these practices flourished. This overall claim is key to my argument in this thesis, which both adopts its politics but at the same time explores what, in the case of Manzoni, it might mean to think peripherally in the European context. While the argument about emancipating the terms of discourse in the case of Latin American art is well made, it does perhaps depend on too crude a characterization of the position of artists in the West.

Narrowing the field to Brazil only, Art historian Sérgio Martins deserves a particular mention in regards to both the history of the Brazilian avant-garde and Hélio Oiticica. In 2013 the scholar published the book *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil 1949-1979* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press) in which he gave a detailed and exhaustive, but accessible, account of Brazilian post-war artists, movements and ideas. As the most comprehensive monograph in English on Brazilian avant-garde art – rivalled only by *Arte Construtiva no Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia Melhoramentos: DBA Artes Gráficas 1998), that however focuses solely on the Adolpho Leiner collection - it brought Brazil to the fore of international art criticism.⁹

In terms of my objectives in this thesis, Martins’ book offers invaluable insights on the material analysed and on Oiticica.¹⁰ Two chapters in particular are of special note. In the chapter ‘Mapping the constructive’, he explains Oiticica’s *modus operandi* with what the artist himself termed to be ‘the constructive’, a longstanding

⁸ I should add to this list of names also Andrea Giunta who at the same time as Camnitzer published *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹ Despite its title, the catalogue *Arte Construtiva no Brasil* was published in both English and Portuguese.

¹⁰ Martins had already published two brilliant articles on the Brazilian artist, later expanded in the book: “White on White on White: Oiticica, Malevich, Nietzsche” (*Object*, 2009, 65-85) and “Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive” (*Third Text*, 2010, 409-422).

concept throughout his career but never a stable one. Martins argues that the ‘constructive’ is an operation and therefore different from what is understood as ‘constructivism’. This operation implies an ‘anthropophagical’ digestion of artist Piet Mondrian. Oiticica reckoned him as one of his great masters, focusing more on the Dutch artist’s creative impulse than on his finished work - and more importantly ‘on the way this impulse could actually run counter to his finished work.’¹¹ Martins indeed affirms that ‘the reading of European modernism with the imperative of reinventing Brazilian culture under the sign of the constructive’ constitutes the matrix of Brazilian avant-gardism.¹² Possessing an inner ‘transformative conceptual autonomy’ that can be disposed in different contexts, Oiticica’s new constructivism is not ‘a simple continuation of pre-war constructivism under a new guise’ but aimed to look back at certain universal qualities active in the works of that period.¹³ Talking about *Tropicália* as the fantastic representation of an image of Brazil, Martins understands it as the perfect site for the ‘constructive’ to perform, since the latter operates in the present but by ‘internalising the frictions of its past(s) and by constructing a subject that is drawn into critically sustaining these frictions.’¹⁴ What I term ‘constructive will’ in my thesis draws specifically on the notion of the ‘constructive’ as discussed by Martins, because of the twofold function ascribed to the term: its notion of transformation and its reclaiming and repurposing of Mondrian’s theory and practice of constructivism.

In the other chapter in Martins’s book that is of particular importance for my argument, ‘White on white’, he focuses at length on the influence that Kazimir Malevich had on Oiticica’s work. He pinpoints two key moments when this occurs: the years of the well-known *Série Branca* (White Series) 1958-59 and during the New York period, mostly after 1973. Martins argues that the way Oiticica engages with Malevich differs greatly between the two moments; what remains constant is the artist’s interest in the colour white. Martins suggests that surprisingly Mondrian

¹¹ Sérgio B. Martins, *Constructing an Avant-garde: Art in Brazil 1949-1979* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 54.

¹² Ibidem. Martins suggests: ‘What Oiticica thus retraces in Mondrian is not a particular “solution”, but rather his ongoing restlessness toward whatever kind of stability painting might have seemed to achieve at any given stage, as in his later use of color as a means of destroying his own lines’, *ibid.* 55.

¹³ Martins, *Constructing an Avant-garde*, 65.

¹⁴ Martins, *Constructing an Avant-garde*, 69.

has initially a greater influence on Oiticica, while the artist's reference to Malevich and Suprematism in regards to the *White Series* is less formal and more general. Broadly speaking, Suprematism was important for the formulation of the Neoconcrete's poetics for its employment of the term 'sensitivity' (translate in Portuguese as *sensibilidade*) that added to the understanding of the art object as *quasi-corpus*. In Oiticica's writings of the seventies, Malevich is acknowledged more precisely, for his treatment of *white on white*. Indeed, in the artist's thinking, the role of Malevich shifted from the 'harbinger of rupture' who has to be overcome, to the 'inventor' who needs to be reclaimed, emphasising the paradoxical but fundamental relation between Oiticica and European avant-garde artists.¹⁵ Both arguments on Mondrian and Malevich that Martins discusses in his book are of fundamental importance, since they demonstrate how complex and varied is the legacy of western avant-gardes in Oiticica's practice. In my thesis I explore this legacy too, drawing on Martins' assumptions and building up a specular argument in reference to Manzoni, investigating the influence of certain neo-avantgarde movements on his work.

A few outstanding monographs on Oiticica have been published in the last few years. Alongside the work of Martins, art historian Paula Braga is the author of some important literature on the Brazilian artist. In 2008 she collected and edited eleven essays published as *Fios Soltos: a arte de Hélio Oiticica* (São Paulo: Perspectiva), with contributions from scholars from five different countries. This publication, in Portuguese and English, constitutes an important basis for future scholarship on Oiticica because it analyses different themes: the bond between body, art, and architecture, the relationship between Oiticica and de Campos brothers, the issues at stake in *Cosmococas*, and so forth. Particularly relevant to my work is the essay by Michael Asbury "Hélio Couldn't Dance", which calls for a renewed analysis of the artist's work; it traces the shifts in Oiticica's writings and emphasises the importance of a historiographical approach that can resist mythologising readings of the artist's trajectory. For example, Asbury contests the idea promulgated by several scholars according to which Oiticica was an excellent *passistas* (samba dancer), building his argument on photographic evidence which reveals that the artist was very concerned with the position of his feet, and therefore not at all at ease with dancing. Asbury's

¹⁵ Martins, *Constructing an Avant-garde*, 169.

article questions the involvement that Oiticica had with the favela and therefore challenges readings that have emphasised his belonging to the community of Mangueira. Asbury's point is rather significant to the argument on the *Parangolés* I developed in chapter 3 of this thesis. Returning briefly to Braga, it is also notable that in 2013 she revised her doctoral thesis as a book, published by Perspectiva in both Portuguese and English: *Hélio Oiticica: Singularidade, Multiplicidade*. The book analyses the 'multiple directions of the artist's work, the "dense, multidimensional mesh" of his conglomerate inventions', focusing mainly on writings and ideas Oiticica developed during the seventies.¹⁶ It therefore explores a less visible period in the life of the artist, contributing with the critical acknowledgement of some less well-studied texts.

In *Hélio Oiticica: a asa branca do êxtase* (Editora Rocco, 2016), Argentinian professor Gonzalo Aguilar identifies and highlights significant moments in the artist's career that give names to the chapters: *Cara de Cavalo* (1964-1967), *Arte moderna para o povo* (Modern art for the people, 1968-1970), *A verdade para o branco* (The truth of white, 1970-1980). The analysis is conducted against the background of Brazilian and Latin American art history. In my view, what is particularly remarkable about this book is the fascinating and broad analysis of the relation between Oiticica and 'white', a theme already discussed more narrowly by Braga and Martins. Aguilar takes a step further in respect to Martins and links the use of white in Oiticica not only to Malevich but also to the de Campos brothers – and therefore to concrete poetry - emphasising mutual influences and contacts. This is important in my work, since in chapter three I explore the importance of both Haroldo de Campos and Umberto Eco in respect to a new understanding of an art object that characterises Oiticica's approach.

Irene Small's excellent book, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) is the most recent monograph published on the artist. It analyses Oiticica's work against the backdrop of Brazil's modernisation, and recognises it as the last outcome of the utopian project inaugurated by European modernism. The book is structured in four chapters – 'the Folded and the Flat', 'the

¹⁶ Celso Favaretto, 'Preface', in Paula Braga, *Hélio Oiticica: singularidade, multiplicidade* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2013), 22.

Cell and the Plan', 'Ready – Constructible Color' and 'What a body can do' – intended to work as 'taxonomies' that narrate Oiticica's conceptual trajectory; it carefully examines Oiticica's works, from the *Metaesquemas* (1958-1960), to the *Parangolé* capes, although again, like many of her predecessors, she doesn't take into account *Cosmococas*, *Program-in-progress*. 'Taxonomy' is a key word in Small's discussion, since the book unveils Oiticica's scientific approach in organising his own work - an attitude that the artist developed while working for his father at the Museu Nacional, the museum of natural history - giving a fresh understanding of his artistic process. Notably, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* is based on an impressive amount of meticulous archival research, evident for example in some previously unpublished illustrations and documents. There is powerful analysis of some less well-known works, such as *Ready Constructible* (1978-1979) and *Made-On-The-Body-Cape*, a project that Oiticica completed following his Whitechapel experience (1970), enriching the knowledge of Oiticica's practice and writings. Despite taking into account some clever insights from Small's book, my thesis differentiates itself from it because it discusses different arguments, has more diverse objectives, particularly in thinking through Oiticica alongside a non-Latin American artist, and it is influenced by other literature – especially Martins.

As mentioned above, apart from the notable exception of Paula Braga, Oiticica's *Cosmococas* have undergone a distinct historiographical reception; scholars have examined these works as separate from the rest of Oiticica's production. As early as 2001, on the occasion of the exhibition at the Wexner Centre for visual arts, Carlos Basualdo edited *Hélio Oiticica: quasi cinemas*. The book investigates Oiticica's relation to cinema; particularly as a result of the influence of Brazilian *cinema novo* and Jack's Smith's experimental works, the artist used intentionally the label 'quasi-cinema' to refer to his experiments in film and slide projections that comprised the *Cosmococas*, the slide series *Neyrótika*, and the film *Agripina é Roma-Manhattan*. A few years later another book came out: *Cosmococa: program in progress: Hélio Oiticica*, Neville D'Almeida (Projeto Hélio Oiticica, 2005) with critical essays by César Oiticica Filho, Paulo Herkenoff and Kátia Maciel. More recently Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz published a more rounded study on these installations: *Block Experiments in Cosmococa* –

program in progress (MIT Press, 2013), taking into consideration the influences that the underground New York scene and the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Henri Bergson among others had on these series of works, therefore constituting the most complete research on this series. The publications that have emerged in the last few years, particularly this last one, indicate a significant turn in the scholarship on Oiticica: if the works he realised in New York had earlier been ‘marginalised’, they have now attracted strong interest among critics, who have redeemed them from an initial mis-reception.

Apart from exhibition catalogues, the most copious literature on Oiticica is constituted by journal articles that often pair him with fellow artist Lygia Clark. These contributions focus mainly on the *Parangolé*, making this work the most emblematic of Oiticica’s practice. Art historian Anna Dezeuze has underscored the ideological and phenomenological circuit in which the *Parangolé* capes took place. She emphasises Oiticica’s attempt ‘to give a voice to the unheard’ by modifying the viewer’s point of view from ‘who I am?’ to ‘who am I in the gaze of the other?’.¹⁷ Scholar Karl Posso has taken into analysis their ‘ethical end’ in enabling the creation of ‘empathetic relations’ between author and participants and between participants themselves.¹⁸ Paula Braga has suggested a new reading of the work. Following on from Waly Salomão’s expression *entrar em parafuso* (‘to get into a state’), Braga parallels the ‘trance-like’ status achieved by the participant wearing the capes and Nietzsche’s assimilation of Apollonian force with its Dionysian counterpart, defined as ‘the collective delight of intoxication achieved through music and dance’.¹⁹ Critic Anna Schober has discussed the ‘monkhood’ quality of *Parangolé*’s textiles together with its carnivalesque exterior, position the work in between ‘religious-mythical rituals and profane ones’.²⁰ Notably, all of these scholars share an interest in the enactment of a twofold process: the transmutation undertaken by the participant that

¹⁷ Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization, sensory politics: Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolé*,” *Art Journal* 63 (Summer 2004): 58-71.

¹⁸ Karl Posso, “An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica’s Expression of Joy and Togetherness,” *Portuguese Studies*, 29 (2013): 44-77.

¹⁹ Paula Braga, “Hélio Oiticica and the *Parangolés*: (Ad)dressing Nietzsche’s *übermensch*,” *Third Text* 17 (2003): 43-52.

²⁰ Anna Schober, “Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*”.

allows the experience of the ‘suprasensorial’, and the shift of the role of the artist from ‘creator’ to ‘instigator of creation’.²¹

To conclude this section on Oiticica, it can be argued that, despite the fact that a certain interest in his work can be already detected in the early nineties, it is only in the last few years that well researched scholarship on his oeuvre has emerged. Nonetheless, often the study of his work is detached from the investigation of contemporary European/North American artists and movements. As suggested above, by instituting a dialogue between Oiticica and Italian artist Piero Manzoni, my thesis aims to address this problem. By considering the practices and theories of Manzoni and Oiticica together, I argue that Oiticica can be understood in ways other than those always determined by Brazilian and Latin American concerns, considering how his engagement with notions of zero art and constant shifts in thinking are among the most profound transformations in international art of the period.²²

1.2 Piero Manzoni

In the next section I am going to evaluate the scholarship on Manzoni, which presents several similarities with the literature on Oiticica. Both artists have witnessed an incredible resurgence of interest in the last ten years that expressed in major retrospectives all over the world. First I shall discuss the generic literature on postwar Italian Art, and then, in chronological order, I shall review catalogues, monographs, thesis and articles.

Two very recent publications have made contributions to the general scholarship on postwar Italian art, a field that has not been rich in new material for a while. Jaleh Mansoor’s *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstract and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Duke University Press, 2016) adopts a Marxist methodology; the book focuses on the repercussions of the Marshall plan for Italian postwar art and attempts to contextualize such practices without recourse to concepts from the Paris-

²¹ See Hélio Oiticica, Position and Program, July 1966, reprinted and translated in *Hélio Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1992), 89.

New York axes. However, despite these premises, Mansoor tends to create antagonistic dialogues between Manzoni, Fontana, and Burri and contemporary American artists, and therefore builds her argument upon oppositional constructs, undermining her claim to bracket out dominant narratives. Moreover, Mansoor relies too often on the concept of ‘prefiguration’ (e.g. she understands Manzoni’s ‘key works as prefigurative explorations of the new theorization of labour as a location of antagonism within and against capital’) that reflects limited historical research and engagement with primary sources.²³ Taking a similar approach but with a different methodology, art historian Jacopo Galimberti published a significant contribution: *Individuals against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1956-1969)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2017). The book analyses collective art practices in the postwar era across Italy and Europe. Galimberti aims to make a social art history of the years of the Cold War, by, for example, unfolding mutual influences between collective art and class struggles, prominent at the end of the sixties. From the perspective of this thesis, the book unfortunately gives limited space to Italian art, taking into consideration only the Padua-based N group and the *Operaisti*.

Turning now back to beginnings of Manzoni literature, the first comprehensive catalogue surveying Manzoni’s work was edited by art historian Germano Celant and published in Italian in 1975. It was only in the nineties that Manzoni’s work began to attract the interest of international scholars. Celant championed and dominated writing on Manzoni for more than thirty years. Celant’s posthumous rediscovery of Manzoni’s oeuvre happened soon after the former had literally forged the newly-born *Arte Povera* group, whose activity was officially inaugurated with the exhibition at the gallery La Bertesca in Genoa, 1967, alongside the publication of the programmatic text ‘Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War.’²⁴ Celant acknowledged Manzoni by treating him as the forerunner of some *Arte Povera*’s tropes.

²² A similar approach is adopted by Irene Small. In one of the chapter of the already mentioned *Folding the Frame*, Small examines Oiticica’s practice in parallel with French artist Yves Klein’s, pp. 157-158.

²³ Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstract and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 129.

²⁴ Germano Celant, ‘Appunti per un’arte di guerriglia’, *Flash Art*, 5 (1967): 3. This became one of his most famous texts; it was actually preceded by other articles on *Bit* and *Casabella* where the scholar mentions the name ‘Arte Povera’ for the first time. For a more detailed account on Celant’s

After Manzoni's death in 1963 several small exhibitions were organised and a few articles published. The most notable event is recorded in 1971: Palma Buccarelli, at that time director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, purchased and exhibited a box of *Merda d'Artista* (Artist's Shit, 1961) for two million Lire, for which she was subsequently subjected to a point of order by Guido Berardi, a Christian Democrat deputy.²⁵ The newspaper *Alto Adige* criticised this choice by equating the price at which the work was sold with its content and therefore naming Manzoni's as 'extravagant art'.²⁶ This anecdote testifies to the troubled reception of Manzoni's work, which partly affected its subsequent scholarship.

Celant published his first article on Manzoni, 'Piero Manzoni: unica dimensione è il tempo' (*Metro*) in 1969. In the latter the art critic affirmed that 'a sociocultural interpretation [of Manzoni's work] is useless, as is every attempt to situate his works in a historical context, they just are, and that is all'.²⁷ He changed his mind soon after: in the 1975 catalogue, Celant adopted a Marxist perspective making Manzoni as an artist who criticised consumer society and the art market. To a certain extent, this stance influenced subsequent literature on the artist. At the same time, Celant contributed to the catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition at Tate gallery, London: *Piero Manzoni: Paintings, Reliefs, Objects* (Tate, 1974). The latter didn't include a critical essay, but instead a chronology of Manzoni's life and works; also, for the first time, some of the most important Manzoni texts were translated and published in English, namely 'For the Discovery of a Zone of Images' ('Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini', 1957), 'Free Dimension' ('Libera dimensione', 1960), and 'Some Realisations, Some Experiments, Some Projects' ('Alcune realizzazioni, alcuni esperimenti, alcuni Progetti', 1962).²⁸

1991 was an important year for the scholarship on Manzoni and the dissemination of his work. A big retrospective was organised at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, then travelling to Herning Kunstmuseum, Fundación

scholarship on Arte Povera see Jacopo Galimberti, 'A Third-worldist Art? Germano Celant's Invention of Art Povera', *Art History*, 36 (2013): 418-441.

²⁵ Flaminio Gualdoni, *Breve Storia della "Merda d'Artista"* (Milano: Skira, 2014).

²⁶ 'Arte o stravaganza?', *Alto Adige*, October 20, 1959.

²⁷ Germano Celant quoted in Jacopo Galimberti, 'The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne', *Oxford Art Journal*, 35 (2012):77.

“La Caixa”, Madrid, and Castello di Rivoli, Turin. The catalogue was, once again, edited by Germano Celant; valuable essays from different foreign scholars were published. Notably, Jens Henrik Sandberg discussed the year Manzoni spent in Herning, Denmark, while Nancy Spector acknowledged America’s temporary blindness towards Manzoni’s work.²⁹ In her essay Spector takes into consideration Jan van der Marck’s thesis, according to which the U.S. artistic scene in the sixties adopted a deliberate anti-European position, and Benjamin Buchloh’s opinion, who affirmed that American art identified itself with a more formalist approach, refusing to engage with historical events. In the same year the *Catalogue Raisonné* was published, edited by Freddy Battino and Luca Palazzoli (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1991). This constitutes an outstanding publication of great significance for research on Manzoni since the catalogue reproduced a lot of unpublished material: letters, journal articles, book excerpts, manifestos, photos. It was the first, almost complete, archival study on Manzoni’s life and works, making accessible to scholars a great amount of material preserved at the Manzoni foundation, a small archive in Milan, run by some of Manzoni’s relatives, which is very difficult to access. The commentary on the material reproduced was however rather brief and did not situate Manzoni’s life and works in a broader context. In 1998 Celant edited the catalogue for the exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London (Milan: Charta, 1998) and in 2004 a general catalogue that reproduced in two volumes Manzoni’s entire production.³⁰

Despite Celant’s intense activity in promoting Manzoni’s work during the nineties and early two-thousands, only in the last ten years has the artist attracted substantial interest among (mainly - with some notable exceptions that I am going to review later) Italian scholars. I shall to discuss the monographs first, then articles and book chapters, and finally the literature on *Artist’s Shit*, that scholars have often treated as distinctive in relation to Manzoni’s other series of works. In 2000 Giorgio Zanchetti published a little book on Manzoni’s performance ‘Art consumption by the Art devouring public’ (*Piero Manzoni: Consumazione dell’arte dinamica del*

²⁸ Germano Celant et al., eds., *Piero Manzoni: Paintings, reliefs and objects* (London: Tate Publishing, 1974), pp. 16-17, 46-47, 84-85.

²⁹ Jens Hendrik Sandberg, ‘Søren Kierkegaard is my father: his goal was to clarify the concept’ in *Piero Manzoni* (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), pp. 27-36; Nancy Spector, ‘A Temporary Blindness: Piero Manzoni and America’, in *Piero Manzoni*, pp. 39-46.

³⁰ Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni: Catalogo Generale* (Milano: Skira, 2004).

pubblico divorare l'arte, Milano: Skira, 2000) emphasising the importance of what ended up being the first happening in the history of Italian art. The book focuses at length on the symbolism of the 'egg' (Manzoni boiled a series of eggs, marked them with his thumbprint and made the audience attending the event eat them). Sometimes the exegesis is pushed too far: Zanchetti associates the egg with the Christian ritual of the Eucharist as well as with the ostrich-egg in the background of the Pala di Brera by Piero della Francesca (1472) that in conjunction with the presence of the Madonna with Child signifies life, creation, and the Immaculate Conception. Granted, Manzoni was educated in a Jesuit school, but it is a stretch to imagine that he could possibly have wanted to charge the egg with Christian symbolism. The pamphlet however deserves to be mentioned for being the first – and the most – comprehensive study on Manzoni's 'happening', highlighting the performative quality of his practice.

In 2006 art historian Francesca Pola published *Piero Manzoni and Albisola* (republished in 2013 in a more complete edition by Mondadori Electa). Albisola, a little sea town in Liguria famous for the manufacturing of pottery was in between the fifties and the sixties a 'melting pot' of various artistic practices and the crossroads for many Italian and international artists. During his childhood and youth, Manzoni used to spend summer holidays there. Through an attentive analysis of primary sources, the book retraces Manzoni's years at Albisola, investigating the impact that the artistic clique gathering in the town had on the artist's oeuvre, as well as Manzoni's exhibitions in this context. The book constitutes an invaluable publication for the archival research it includes; moreover, the significance of Manzoni's bond with Albisola had been previously neglected by scholarly criticism.

Between 2013 and 2014, on the occasion of the anniversary of Manzoni's death, a few monographs were published and a major retrospective organised at the Palazzo Reale in Milan. Scholar Gaspare Luigi Marcone edited a volume on Manzoni's writings (*Piero Manzoni: scritti sull'arte*, Milano: Abscondita 2013) and Manzoni's diary (Milano: Electa, 2014); both presenting unpublished materials based on a meticulous investigation of primary sources – although they remain untranslated into English. Francesca Pola published *Piero Manzoni e Zero: una regione creativa Europea* (*Piero Manzoni and Zero: a creative European Region*, Milano: Electa,

2014), examining Manzoni's collaboration with the German Zero group and therefore giving to research on the artist a more international outlook. Only the year before, Flaminio Gualdoni released the book *Piero Manzoni: vita d'artista* (*Piero Manzoni: an artist's life*, Milano: Johan&Levi, 2013), surveying Manzoni's life and works chronologically. What the last couple of books mentioned have in common is their narrative bias, revealing little or no critical approach to the subject, evident in the lack of a theoretical background framing of Manzoni's practice in relation to contemporaneous artists and movements. Moreover, none of these publications appeared in English, making their reception limited to Italian scholarship. This testifies to the international 'censorship' to which Manzoni's work is still subjected, as reported by Italian art historian Michele Dantini, who blames the American academy – probably he refers to the *October* group – for deliberately ignoring and devaluing Manzoni's oeuvre as a mere kitsch joke.³¹ Dantini attempts to compensate for this injustice by publishing an article – still in Italian only – where he labels the artist as a 'neo-dadaist', pairing his practice with Cy Twombly, Picasso and even Duchamp, developing a non-linear and perhaps rather bizarre narrative around Manzoni's work.³²

Four publications in English have constituted the basis of my study on Manzoni: Briony Fer's chapter 'Series' (in her *The Infinite Line: re-making Art after Modernism*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2004), Gregory Tentler's Ph.D. thesis 'Without expensive transport or the bother of customs: Piero Manzoni and the postwar avant-garde 1956-1963' (University of Pennsylvania, 2010), Jacopo Galimberti's article 'The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne' (Oxford Art Journal, 2012), and John Thomas McGrath's Ph.D. thesis 'Body, Subject, Self: the Art of Piero Manzoni' (Harvard University, 2014). Fer's book chapter brilliantly acknowledges Manzoni's *modus operandi* in series; however, despite the creation of multiples, the scholar argues on the 'insistence of me' in Manzoni's works, emphasising the artist's subjective approach to the process of art making. Despite the fact that I reckon the

³¹ Michele Dantini, 'Piero Manzoni e la duplice censura,' available at http://www.huffingtonpost.it/michele-dantini/piero-manzoni-arte_b_5438395.html.

³² Michele Dantini, 'Piero Manzoni 1959: tre Achromes "prensili" e una svolta New Dada,' *Predella*, 34 (2015): 319-345

analysis of Manzoni's practice of working in series as fundamental for the scholarship on the artist, I nevertheless consider Fer's critique as emblematic of an approach to Manzoni that is in some degree problematic because of the resistance to a social art history and the absence of systematic historical and archival research to support the position taken; I therefore challenge some of her arguments at length in chapter 2. Tentler's dissertation aims to investigate Manzoni's work in contexts of postwar Milan and other European centres, giving a more comprehensive and historically grounded understanding of the artist's practice. The thesis stands out for its impressive archival research and the analysis of primary sources that upstage any other study conducted beforehand; it does not, however, formulate any new methodological and theoretical approach on Manzoni's work, which is still treated in terms of its debt to Duchamp and to conceptual art in general. Galimberti manifests a similar intent, i.e. to reflect upon Manzoni's work in relation to the Milanese artistic landscape. He therefore examines the artist's cultural background and political opinion in light of the philosophical and intellectual environment in which he grew up and worked. Particularly this last aspect stands out as innovative, since Manzoni's relationship to politics has not been examined before. Galimberti argues that Manzoni's 'subversive humour appears to be a deliberate departure from contemporary forms of leftist art' differentiating his work from forms of so-called socially engaged practice and proposing a more egalitarian and democratic reading.³³ Galimberti's article constitutes the starting point for both my investigation into Manzoni's political (or anti-political) ideas and philosophical interests as well the importance of Luigi Pareyson's aesthetic theories – further developed by Eco in his *Open Work* – for contemporary intellectuals. Also, from Galimberti I adopt the reading – discussed in chapter 3 – of Manzoni's art as a satirical challenge to the ethos of leftist art movements, whose members naively believed possible to democratise the art system through the inclusion of the spectator in the work.³⁴ In contrast to Galimberti, McGrath's general methodology returns to a Marxist

³³ Jacopo Galimberti, 'The Intellectual and the Fool', 77.

³⁴ Similarly Galimberti writes: 'the mainstream view endorsed multiple as progressive art attempting to humanise capitalism from within. Artist's Shit's 'subversive humour' was first and foremost a comment on this very idea and only secondarily a 'satire of the *miracolo italiano*' [...] Manzoni's humour could be regarded as elitist, undermining the work of leftist figures who genuinely believed in

interpretation of Manzoni's work; however, the dissertation offers some useful insights. Specifically, from McGrath I borrow the interpretation he gives of Manzoni's participatory works, according to which the artist would enact a reification of the body, unfolding the nihilistic intent that permeates his practice. Although I support the analysis of the body as reified in some of Manzoni's works, I do not confer upon him a nihilistic attitude but on the contrary a provocative one, 'open' to multiple propositions, as addressed in chapter 3.

As already mentioned, *Artist's Shit* underwent a distinct reception; the scandal that the work initially provoked prompted the emergence of a separate literature. Gerald Silk gives a historical account of the precedents on which Manzoni could have built the idea of *Artist's Shit*, interpreting the work as deriving from Duchamp's conceptualism, from shamanic and alchemical rituals that often used body products, and in the context of Freud's theories on anal eroticism, as already suggested by Celant.³⁵ Silk superficially touches upon the problem of the 'series', but he does not fully acknowledge the paradoxical relation between originality and reproduction that I explore in chapter 4. A similar approach to Silk is found in Emiliano Dante's *Merda d'Artista* (Roma: Aracne, 2005) and Flaminio Gualdoni's *Breve storia della Merda d'Artista* (Milano: Skira, 2014). The latter is a book of limited academic value, published to promote Manzoni's work to a general audience, and distributed on the occasion of the retrospective at Palazzo Reale the very same year.

To conclude, it can be inferred that the literature on Manzoni is currently dominated by Italian scholarship, which lately has tried to promote the artist to a broader public, to the detriment of a more substantial theoretical and historical analysis. The international scholarship on Manzoni is instead still very limited, despite the attempts of the last few years. My thesis sets out on this unexplored ground, contributing to the translation of some pivotal texts. Moreover, given earlier attempts that have considered Manzoni only in parallelism with European or north American artists (i.e. Yves Klein and Andy Warhol), my thesis endeavours to take step further. By investigating Manzoni alongside Oiticica, my aim is to eschew any narrow reading of his work - clustered in a anglo-european frame - and to adopt a

voicing social concerns and diffusing democratic values'. Jacopo Galimberti, 'The Intellectual and the Fool', 85.

fresh perspective that complicates and enriches the understanding of his practice.³⁶ I indeed bring to the fore some unexplored ideas: the relationship between Manzoni, the audience, and the issue of participation in contemporary practice; philosophical and political implications in some of Manzoni's works. Finally, placing Manzoni alongside Oiticica helps to identify some recurring global concerns that the artists shared across the globe during the sixties, as well as to move away from dichotomic oppositions between northern and southern countries, central and peripheral regions that have affected the art historical scholarship until very recently.

1.3 Other Literature

The way I have shaped the last section of this literature review - following the orders of the chapters - might resemble the outline of the chapters informing this thesis; however, in the present section I focus on the literature only, while I shall discuss the actual content of the various parts constituting this dissertation at the end of this introduction.

General literature on the sixties, mostly aimed at those new to the subject, is of little or no use to my dissertation. This is because it does not take into account Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice, acknowledging the two artists only marginally (thereby inadvertently pointing to the question of marginality that is central to my consideration of the artists). For example, Alexander Alberro's *Conceptual Art and the politics of publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003) traces the establishment of the movement from the mid-sixties onwards focusing on popular American artists only, namely Joseph Kosuth, Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt and Lawrence Weiner and on the role of the American born art dealer Seth Siegelaub in promoting the movement; Oiticica is not mentioned at all and Manzoni appears as briefly referenced in a footnote.³⁷ In *After Modern Art, 1945-2000* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000), David Hopkins saves for Manzoni an entire

³⁵ Gerard Silk, 'Myths and meanings in Manzoni's Merda d'Artista', *Art Journal*, 52 (1993): 65-75.

³⁶ Galimberti wrote his master thesis on Manzoni and Klein and subsequently published an article on this matter, "Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni: genealogia di un mito." *L'Uomo Nero* 11-12 (2016): 243-251. In the last chapter of his Ph.D. dissertation, John Thomas McGrath names Manzoni the Italian Andy Warhol, "Body, Subject, Self: the Art of Piero Manzoni", 2014.

chapter section, but places him in the ‘shadow’ of fellow artist Yves Klein. ‘It is useful here to look to an artist who, in many ways, acted as Klein’s shadow, producing unambiguously acid materialist counter-propositions to the French artist’s excesses’ affirms Hopkins.³⁸ The scholar falls back into a series of stereotypical interpretative patterns, some of which I have already discussed: the comparison between Manzoni’s *Achromes* and Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* and the parallelism between Manzoni’s *Artist Shit* and Duchamp’s readymades; moreover he defines Manzoni’s *consumption of art* as a ‘pseudo-eucharistic performance, somehow influenced by the contemporary election of Pope John XXIII’ an approach already adopted by Italian literature.³⁹ Hopkins’ book therefore neither contributes a fresh perspective on Manzoni, nor does it mention Oiticica at all. Similarly, in *The rise of the sixties*, Thomas Crow discusses only Manzoni, again paralleling his practice to Klein’s, Duchamp’s, and Rauschenberg’s. Because of the limitations of the aforementioned literature to the development of a dialogue between Oiticica and Manzoni, in my thesis I rely on specific literature on Oiticica and Manzoni, avoiding books that tend to establish grand narratives but do not take into account local art histories. It is my contention that it is through such local histories that a critical understanding of the complexity of avant-garde practice in the 1960s can emerge.

However, beyond the specific scholarship on Oiticica and Manzoni, in every chapter I engage with other literary threads as well. Overall, my project is based on the assumption that the practice of both artists can be interpreted in terms of what might be called a ‘degree zero’ aesthetics. My understanding of ‘zero’ is partly indebted to Roland Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), a significant book for modern literature that I discuss at length later in this introduction. I again focus on the notion of zero aesthetics in chapters 1 and 2, arguing that both Oiticica and Manzoni explored this idea in their practice. Besides the zero concept I discuss other theoretical issues too. In Chapter 1, I often refer to the idea of ‘postmodernism’, a now very difficult and contested term that could potentially refer to a multiplicity of meanings. My usage of this term is grounded in Hal Foster’s understanding of it as

³⁷ Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the politics of publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 178, n. 51.

³⁸ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art, 1945-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85

³⁹ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art*, 86.

expressed in the preface to *Postmodern Culture* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1987), a collection of essays by Jürgen Habermas, Kenneth Frampton, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Gregory L. Ulmer, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Edward W. Said, all reflecting on different aspects of Postmodernity. In the essays, Postmodernism is variously defined as a ‘break with the aesthetic field of modernism’, as a ‘new “schizophrenic” mode of space and time or as ‘the fall of modern myths of progress and mastery’. In the preface, Foster conceives postmodernism as ‘conflict of new and old modes – cultural and economic, the one not entirely autonomous, the other not all determinative – and of the interests vested therein’ and asserts the agenda of the book as ‘to disengage the emergent cultural forms and social relations and to argue the import of doing so.’⁴⁰ One of the most remarkable contributions, and the most useful to my discussion, is Foster’s definitions of a postmodernism of resistance that ‘deconstructs modernism and resists the status quo’ and a postmodernism of reaction that indicates a turn towards “tradition”, and therefore rejects modernism and celebrates the status quo.⁴¹ In my chapter on Manzoni I invoke Foster’s idea of a postmodernism of resistance.

In chapter 3 Umberto Eco’s the *Open Work* (*Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*, Milano: Bompiani, 1962) frames my discussion on Oiticica and Manzoni’s participatory works. Written in 1962, the *Open Work* deals with plurality and multiplicity in the arts and unfolds the porous status of the art object that activates an interactive relationship between the author and its user (a spectator, a reader, and so forth). Building on Eco’s ideas allows me to explore the kind of participation (physical or conceptual awareness) enacted by Manzoni and Oiticica in some of their works; also, the *Open Work* greatly influences the future literature on participation in contemporary art. Scholars Claire Bishop, Grant H. Kester and Nicolas Bourriaud, authors of some major texts on the relation between the author, the work and the audience from the nineties onwards, all pay their debt to Eco, sometimes building productively upon his theories, sometimes misunderstanding key concerns. Claire Bishop has a prominent role in my narrative; I take into consideration three texts: the book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and*

⁴⁰ Hal Foster, ‘Preface,’ in *Postmodern Culture* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1987): xi.

⁴¹ Foster, ‘Preface,’ xii.

the Politics of Spectatorship (London and New York: Verso, 2012) and the articles ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ (*OCTOBER* 110, 2004, 51-79) and ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ (*Artforum*, 2006). *Artificial Hells* is an outstanding comprehensive monograph on the history of participation in the twentieth and twenty-first century. In my thesis I borrow a few ideas from the chapter ‘Social Sadism Made Explicit’ (pp. 105-128) in which Bishop addresses the works of Alberto Greco and Oscar Bony in light of the spectacle, segregating the audience in a passive corollary position. Written a few years before, the article ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ contextualises Bourriaud’s ideas – expressed in the book of the same name – discussing artists Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija for being the best exemplars of Bourriaud’s theories. She therefore points out that Bourriaud’s understanding of the art work as a *locus* that triggers potential participation is nothing new: it was anticipated by Walter Benjamin’s *the Author as Producer* and Umberto Eco’s *Open Work*, that express similar characterisations of the art object – although Bishop accuses Bourriaud of misinterpreting Eco’s assumptions, as I address more thoroughly in chapter 3. Moreover, and this is her main point, Bishop criticises Bourriaud for ‘judging’ open-ended, participatory works on the bases of the ‘relations’ they produce, therefore following political and ethical criteria. According to Bishop, Bourriaud equates aesthetic with ethicopolitical judgment, assuming that the relations producing ‘dialogues’ are necessarily democratic and therefore good.⁴² To challenge Bourriaud’s postulates, Bishop refers to the concept of ‘antagonism’, grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of subjectivity. ‘Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of an authoritarian order – a total suppression of debate and discussion which is inimical to democracy’ she affirms.⁴³ She claims that the relations set up by Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic since they rely on the idea of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness. In ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, Bishop similarly criticises Grant H. Kester, accusing him of refusing ‘any art that can trouble its audience’ and of only judging a work of art on the basis of ethical concerns, for its merit of producing ‘empathetic

⁴² Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *OCTOBER* 110 (2004): 65.

⁴³ Bishop, ‘Antagonism’, 66.

axes' among its participants. Contrary to what Kester suggests, Bishop advocates a (re)thinking of 'the aesthetic and the socio/political together rather than subsuming both within the ethical.'⁴⁴ Bishop is extremely important in my discussion for several reasons: not only does she acknowledge Eco's theory as an unavoidable premise for the subsequent literature on participation in contemporary practices, but she also emphasises the importance of 'antagonism', refuting a particularly politically correct ethos that has affected some scholars in their analysis of such practices.

Shifting focus in chapter 4, I take into consideration other pivotal texts in my thesis. The first part of the chapter is grounded on both Claudia Calirman's *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) and Christopher Dunn's *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture*; both constitute the most comprehensive accounts to date on the relation between art and dictatorship in Brazil and the contemporaneous countercultural movement Tropicália. Calirman analyses how the most repressive years of the Brazilian dictatorship (1968-1975) triggered the emerging of certain art practices that negotiated between the desire of voicing political concerns and the aspirations of overcoming artistic boundaries; notably she focuses on the career of three major artists: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles. As far as my thesis is concerned, I am particularly influenced by Calirman's methodology in coupling visual art and political issues, and her approach to taking into account the aesthetic sphere and the will to become internationally acclaimed, shared by both the artists at the centre of my study. Similarly, Dunn narrates the history of Brazilian art's most successful movement, Tropicália, which appropriated and mocked Brazilian cultural tropes coming from the popular folklore in order to display the gap between such idealised images and the 'brutality' of the contemporary socio-political background. Remarkably, Dunn spotted and acknowledged the importance of Oiticica's practice in the formation of the Tropicália movement.

⁴⁴ Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,' *Artforum* (2006).

2. Boxes, cans, packages, parcels...

I argued at the beginning of this introduction that Manzoni and Oiticica's practice responds to a multiplicity of readings and overcomes traditional aesthetic categories, fragmenting grand narratives that substantiate modernist art history. To give an example of how I might justify these claims, I shall now give a critical analysis of Hélio Oiticica's *B17 Glass Bólide 5, Homage to Mondrian*, 1965 and Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit*, 1961. To clarify, I do not want to make a comparative study, or set up a forced parallelism between the two works: although both *B17 Glass Bólide 5* and *Artist's Shit* are objects, specifically boxes made of ready-made elements, they are in fact based upon entirely different assumptions and need to be analysed separately. My speculative treatment therefore serves my discussion by unfolding some of the issues works by Oiticica and Manzoni raise in general. Both the *B17 Glass Bólide 5* and the *Artist's Shit* are exemplary of these issues – e.g. the obsession with bright colours, poor/ready-made materials, and traces of the artist and so forth – and symptomatic of the contemporary artistic context.

Oiticica's glass bolide *Homage to Mondrian* [fig. 03] is a sculptural object constructed out of a combination of different media: a yellow liquid fills up a glass ampule that is closed by a cork; several fabrics – of different textures, materials and colours – are attached at the top of its neck to mimic the spouting of colourful fluids from out of the container. There are three types of fabric: the biggest cloth is an eggshell blue nylon sheet, which is draped like a classical garment; two pieces of yellow and orange hessian are placed underneath the nylon sheet, partially hidden by it; and the smallest piece of fabric is a red lacey mesh, which is brought to the fore by its vivid colours. A viscous yellow fluid-like substance undulates at the bottom of the vessel.

Homage to Mondrian belongs to the glass sub-series of the 'Bólides', which literally translates as 'fireballs'. If 'Box Bólides' (*Bólides caixas*), made of painted plywood, resemble miniature and manageable architectural constructions that seem ready to explode from the brightness of their colours, 'Glass Bólides' deliver a similar effect, yet making greater play with the

reflection of light. Since they contain a mixture of coloured pigments and water, these transparent ‘trans-objects’ look like the phials that can be found in a chemist’s laboratory. This is illustrative of Oiticica’s obsession with both materiality and colour, as scrutinised by an alchemical eye. The artist himself provides an account of the genesis of this series in one of his texts:

I could characterize my latest works, the *Bólides*, as ‘Trans-objects’. The fact is that the need to give a new structure to colour, to give it ‘body’, brought me the most unexpected results, one of which was the development of the *Bólides* from opaque to transparent, to a stage where colour not only presents itself in the oil and glue techniques, but in its pigmentary state, contained in the actual *Bólide* structure.⁴⁵

These words of Oiticica provoke further reflections. Like his other works, this series permits multiple interpretations from different perspectives. The systematic attitude that characterises his process of making reflects Oiticica’s scientific approach, a distinctive trait of his that is often overlooked in current literature.⁴⁶ With the appropriation of pre-fabricated objects, we are likely to consider the *Bólides* as ready-made objects that draw upon the legacy of Duchamp. However, Oiticica knowingly and emphatically detaches his work from such an association by insisting on the importance that the choice of a specific object is motivated upon an idea that exists ‘*a priori*’. Oiticica’s attitude stands in opposition to the ‘law of chance’ praised by Duchamp and fellow artists. Moreover, this aprioristic analytical approach suggests that a ‘clear or cohesive’ methodology can be identified behind the artist’s work. Notably, Oiticica states that the object that will constitute his work is found ‘not by “chance”, or in the “multiplicity of things” [...] but is sighted without indecision in the world of objects [...] as the only possible object for the realisation of a particular creative idea, intuited “a priori”’.⁴⁷ This shows that Oiticica intends for the *Bólides* not to slavishly embrace Duchamp’s heritage

⁴⁵ Hélio Oiticica, “Bólides,” in *Hélio Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte De With, Centre for Contemporary Art, 1992), 66.

⁴⁶ With the notable exception of Irene Small. See *Hélio Oiticica. Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); “Morphology in the Studio: Hélio Oiticica at the Museu Nacional,” *Getty Research Journal* 1 (2009): 107-126.

⁴⁷ Hélio Oiticica, “Bólides,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 67.

but instead to offer a critical commentary on the idea of ready-made itself. In this manner the Brazilian wants to prompt a shift from the subject to the object, that is to say from the choice made by the artist to the open structure possessed by the work itself, which is ‘open because already predisposed to being captured by the spirit’.⁴⁸

The ‘openness’ of these objects characterises their ‘transformative’ qualities. Oiticica explains the term ‘trans-objects’ as follows:

What I do, on transforming into a work, is not simply to make the object ‘lyrical’, or place it outside the everyday, but incorporate it into the aesthetic idea, making it part of the genesis of the work, it thus assumes a transcendental character, participating in a universal idea without losing its previous structure. Hence the designation ‘Trans-Object’, to account for the experience.⁴⁹

Stepping away from Oiticica’s understanding and explanation of his creative process, the *Bólides*’ transformative features can also be analysed from another perspective. By employing different media, these ‘trans-objects’ show the artist’s leap between the making of one series to the next. They constitute a significant point of transition in that they retain elements of preceding works while also incorporating materials that will feature in future series. On the one hand, *B17 Glass Bólide 5, Homage to Mondrian* expands on the relation between colour and structure already explored in the series *Invenções* (*Inventions*, 1959-62). On the other hand, it paves the way for the creation of the *Parangolé* capes [fig. 04]. The 1965 *Bólide* foreshadows fundamental characteristics that define the artist’s future work not only by similarly investigating the properties of colour, but also through the insertion of ‘poor’ materials, like the rags glued to the top of the phial’s neck. The *Parangolé* consists of various pieces of colourful fabrics stitched together and made to be worn by the spectator/participant. Oiticica created this work after joining the most famous samba school in the Mangueira favela (1964) and the ‘poorness’

⁴⁸ Hélio Oiticica, “Bólides,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

of the materials employed is an explicit reference to what he witnessed there. In fact dance is the other fundamental element: to be ‘activated’ as work of art, the *Parangolé* has to be worn by the former-viewer-now-participant. Therefore, in view of the way in which Oiticica creates a close relation between the *Parangolé* capes and dance, I argue that movement is what qualifies them as works of art. A *Parangolé* on a hanger is not a *Parangolé*.⁵⁰

On first analysis, it appears that the difference between the *Parangolé* and the glass *Bólido* entitled *Homage to Mondrian* is both significant and straightforward; the small, static jug-like object is in direct contrast with the colourful capes designed to be worn on-the-move. However, closer analysis reveals similarities, not only from an aesthetic perspective – because the materials and colours employed are alike – but also from an ontological understanding of their characteristics. Both share a ‘performative’ quality. As already asserted, the *Parangolé* is activated through the movement of the body and as such its relation with the surrounding space emphasises its three-dimensional state. Because of the haptic qualities of both the colour pigments melted in water and the textiles, *Glass Bólido 5* appeals to the tactile gaze of the audience. Simultaneous to this, the construction resembles a container of inflammable materials ready to explode. The combination of draped fabrics – which are attached to the vase as if they are floating – together with the smallness of the object itself generate a sense of inner movement. This creates the feeling that this object is made to be handled and, as such, also made to be eventually thrown away by the viewer.

The *Bólidos* can be productively compared Antonio Manuel’s *Urnas Quentes* (*Hot Urns*) [fig. 05], Oiticica’s fellow Brazilian artist Manuel developed these works for the event *Apocalipopótese*, whose title is a neologism meaning ‘the hypothesis of an apocalypse’. The event was organised by Oiticica and was held deliberately on the eve of the AI-5 (1968)

⁵⁰ See Hélio Oiticica, “Notes on the Parangolé,” in Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialisation, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolé,” *Art Journal* 68, 2 (2004): 64.

act, which ushered in the most repressive period of the Brazilian dictatorship.⁵¹ The *Urnas Quentes* consisted of rectangular wooden boxes that were sealed and which the audience had to break in order to disclose their contents. Their performative quality consists in the violent act that was required of the public; it was only through this action that their meaning was activated. These boxes contained images, slogans, poems and cut-outs related to the contemporaneous political situation. They were named ‘quentes’ (hot) in order to signify a sense of urgency. In Portuguese, the term ‘urn’ refers to both the ‘funerary urn’ and to the ‘ballot box’. In this manner the work’s title denounces the lack of a democratic government in Brazil as the military junta had suspended political elections in 1968.⁵² Further comparison sheds greater light on the link between Oiticica and Manuel: among the new *Parangolé* capes shown during the event, Oiticica exhibited one that he had made with Antonio Manuel, called *Nirvana*. It depicted an emaciated, stylised figure on a white background. Similarly, the items contained in Manuel’s *Urns* included texts on which the word ‘hunger’ was repeatedly written and pieces of paper with drawings of starved bodies. The exhibition of such objects in this format aimed to bypass the regime’s censorship. Following a different dialectic from that of Manuel’s *Hot Urns* but demanding a similarly violent action, the *Bólides* symbolised a radical aesthetical turn: by exploding and throwing colours into space, they challenged the flatness of the canvas.

The last distinguishable thread in *Homage to Mondrian* is indicated by its title in reference to Piet Mondrian’s legacy. Both Mondrian (1872-1944) and the Swiss artist Max Bill’s (1908-1994) Constructivism played a significant role in the development of modern art in Brazil, particularly from the 1950s onwards.⁵³ The influence of Mondrian on the *Glass Bólide 5* is evident in both the employment of primary colours and the sense of verticality engendered by the upright ampoule, which nods to the perpendicular stripes featuring in the

⁵¹ *Apocalipopótese* took place in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ) on 18 August, 1968. It witnessed the participation of Antonio Manuel, Lygia Pape – who exhibited her ‘Ovos’ (Eggs) – as well as Rogerio Duarte and Oiticica himself.

⁵² See Cynthia Marie Canejo, “Gesto Efêmeros e Obras Tangíveis, a Trajetória de Antonio Manuel,” *Novos Estudos* 76 (2006): 269-270.

Dutch artist's canvases. From a theoretical perspective, the relation to Mondrian is explained in the following statement:

What is certain is that there is no escape for the figurative artist ... by the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as 'mural art' or 'applied art', but being purely constructive, will aid the creation of an environment, not merely utilitarian or rational, but also pure and complete in its beauty.⁵⁴

Oiticica takes this excerpt from Mondrian's essay 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art'.⁵⁵ This act of appropriation demonstrates the artist's intention to adhere to and to advance Mondrian's approach in order posit a new state where the boundaries between artistic genres might become blurred. The reference to Mondrian and Constructivism is already visible in Oiticica's earlier works, the *Metaesquemas*, which mainly comprise two-colour paintings in oil on canvas that display an arrangement of geometric shapes, based either on a mirror effect or a regular rhythm. In this way, Sérgio Martins states, 'Oiticica was able to situate himself as the continuation and apex of a constructive project – Mondrian's – firstly through his painterly activity' and secondly by questioning the limits imposed by the flatness of the canvas.⁵⁶ After these early paintings, he went on to further explore the rearrangement of colour and structure in space through several works: the *Bilaterals* (1959) [fig. 06], double-sided paintings made to be hung from the ceiling; *Invenções* (Inventions) painted structures of vertical layers of colours; *Relevos Espaciais* (Spatial Relief, 1960) [fig. 07], hanging wood constructions; and *Núcleos* (Nuclei, 1960-66) [fig. 08], large-scale installations of monochromatic paintings arrayed in space as floating architecture and harmoniously displayed according to shades of colours. Made soon after the *Invenções*, from 1963

⁵³ See Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro et al., *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014).

⁵⁴ Hélio Oiticica, "Apiro Ao Grande Labirinto," in Sérgio Bruno Martins, "Mapping the Constructive," *Third Text* 24 (2010): 410.

⁵⁵ 1936.

⁵⁶ Sérgio Bruno Martins, "Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive," 412.

onwards, the *Bólides* fit perfectly into this lineage constituting, if not its climax, then certainly its point of transition. The twofold aim of the *Bólides* – to perpetuate Mondrian’s project and to simultaneously blur the lines between artistic genres – is also demonstrated by the origin of the name itself: the title of the *Bólides* series is taken from Humberto Mauro’s film *Ganga Bruta*, 1933 (Brutal Gang). As Oiticica explained:

The idea came to me while I was watching *Ganga Bruta*, a film by Humberto Mauro in which the characters wear white and their white costumes catch and reflect the light. Mauro lit his actors [...] and, as they rolled across a lawn, in this one scene, the effect was very much one of fireballs.⁵⁷

In view of their paradoxical juxtaposition of heavy tactile and material qualities, as well as the potentiality of exploding and being dematerialised by the action of light, the *Bólides* could be acknowledged as ephemeral structures. This is because they resist stylistic labels, evade traditional notions of the ready-made and sculpture, and concurrently create a complex network of references: to avant-garde abstraction such as Mondrian’s, to contemporaneous constructivist practices championed by Max Bill and to the current local political situation through their similarity to Manuel’s *Hot Urns*.

The understanding of these objects as ephemeral ready-mades – because of the employment of both pre-fabricated objects and ‘poor’ materials – opens up another narrative that connects the production of the *Bólides* to issues of power relations in Brazil. Since Brazil was still playing a marginal role in the international manufacturing system, the commodity represented an ‘inordinately inconsistent object riven with the inequities of the modern global

⁵⁷ ‘Eu tive essa idéia quando eu vi um filme do Humberto Mauro, *Ganga Bruta*, em qua sas pessoas usam roupas brancas e a roupa branc refletia luz, então elei luminava as pessoas vestindo de branco... então as pessoas rolavam e pareciam bólides’. Ivan Cardoso interviews Hélio Oiticica for the film HO, in Silvia Roesler, ed., *Hélio Oiticica: a pintura depois do quadro* (Rio de Janeiro, 2008), 33, translated by Stephen Berg.

economic system'.⁵⁸ According to this perspective, the *Bólides* acted as commentaries on the Brazilian developmentalist context from which they emerged. As Irene Small asserts:

Adopting the role of the designer who provides a prototype or schema rather than a finished work of art, Concretism sought to elementarise not painting so much as the division of artistic labour. Indeed, just as Oiticica began his *Bólides* series in 1963, this paradigm was formalised in the Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial [...] while the concretist and subsequent ESDI students had considerable success in the latter endeavour through book covers, posters and urban landscape designs, the more ambitious objectives in industrial design proved more difficult to implement.⁵⁹

Therefore Small suggests that the construction of the *Bólides* is emblematic of the inner contradictions affecting Brazilian modernity. While I accept her argument on the relation between the *Bólides* and the contemporaneous desire for modernisation in Brazil, I doubt that being 'commentaries on the Brazilian developmentalist context' is the central concern in these works. As I have explained, these works are deliberately ambiguous, polyvalent, and this invites a wide range of readings, some of which are in my view wide of the mark.

Turning to Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (1961), there are both substantial differences and notable similarities, even if unintended, between this and Oiticica's *Bólides*. The reason for the resemblances relate to contexts. Just as it had done in Oiticica's Brazil, the development of a new design industry and the legacy of Constructivism were influential on Italian art during the post-war years.⁶⁰ The constructivist heritage is reflected in the Milan-based M.A.C. Movimento Arte Concreta (Movement of Concrete Art). In 1949 Gillo Dorfles, champion critic of the movement, defined Concrete Art as:

⁵⁸ Irene V. Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2016), 161.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Andrea Branzi, "Italian Design and the Complexity of Modernity," in Germano Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis 1943-1968* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1994) 598-606; Penny Sparke, *Italian Design: 1870 to the present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988). For an account on the increased use of synthetic materials, particularly plastic, see John Thomas McGrath, "Body Subject, Self: The art of Piero Manzoni," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2014).

[...] based only on the objective production of the artist's insights, made concrete by images of form and colour, far from any symbolic meaning or formal abstraction. Concrete Art seeks to capture only those rhythms, those cadences, those chords, which enrich a colourful world [...]⁶¹

During the same period, the Italian design industry was championed by renowned figures such as Gio Ponti, Achille Castiglioni and Marco Zanuso, who were promoting Italian luxury design on the international scene.⁶² Drawing from this context – the design scene – in 1961, the Milan-born visual artist Piero Manzoni produced a peculiar series of boxes: ninety sealed tins named *Merda d'Artista (Artist's Shit)* [fig. 0.9]. The artist affirms that these cylindrical cans contained 30 grams of Manzoni's excrement, as stated on the containers in four different languages:

Artist's Shit
CONTENTS 30 GRAMS NET
FRESHLY PRESERVED
PRODUCED AND TINNED
IN MAY 1961

Commenting on the alleged accuracy of the label, journalist Romano F. Cattaneo wrote: 'it's almost surprising that with such descriptive precision the artist forgot to add "packaged as by law with no use of artificial colours" as prescribed for canned goods'.⁶³ This shows how familiar the packaging would have sounded to the wider public, who at the time was witnessing a boom in

⁶¹ Reproduced in Luciano Caramel, ed., *Movimento Arte Concreta, 1948-1952* (Milano: Electa, 1984), 18.

⁶² Notably, in a letter to Vincenzo Aignetti, Enrico Castellani, Manzoni's fellow artist, critically comments upon Max Bill's Moebius strip and the dogmatism of neo-constructivism: 'Max Bill has executed a sculpture directly materializing Moebius' mathematical formula; in this respect, we can argue that all that interests us is the formula, in fact it exists before and even without the sculpture, while Bill's sculpture is nothing but a beautiful shape and, although strictly calculated, free because sterile for the purposes of a becoming of the art, in fact it does not initiate any discourses and Mr. Bill will have to wait for another moebius and another formula to have the opportunity to make another sculpture.' Quoted in Francesca Pola, *Piero Manzoni e Zero: una regione creativa europea* (Milano: Electa, 2014), 139-140, footnote 59, my translation. Notably in 1966 Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark created the work *Diálogo de Manos* fastening both wrists with a Moebius strip; the work was intended to be an homage to Moebius but it ended up having a sensual appearance, exceeding the rationalism of the mathematical formula on which it was based.

⁶³ 'C'è quasi da stupirsi che in tanta precisione descrittiva l'artista abbia dimenticato di aggiungere: "confezionata a norma di legge senza l'uso di coloranti artificiali", come è prescritto per i prodotti in

the marketing of canned products. Made to be sold for the price of the equivalent weight of gold, *Artist's Shit* was first exhibited in August 1961 at the Galleria Pescetto at Albissola Marina – a small sea town in Liguria, where the Milanese artistic élite used to go on holiday.

According to scholar James Thomas McGrath, the relation between *Artist's Shit* and the global gold markets has several implications. Firstly, the work gains what McGrath calls a 'participatory dimension' because of its tie to a specific process of exchange. 'Participatory' seems an odd term to use to define a situation enacted by a capitalist mode of production. As such, I instead define this aspect as a 'commercial dimension', by which I mean not the corporeal entity of the audience but the abstract model of production/consumption that activates the meaning of the work. Secondly, McGrath asserts that 'the work becomes temporally and historically specific' as it is sutured to 'the specificities of capitalist relations at the very moment of its exchange'. I argue that the peculiarity of *Artist's Shit* does not rely on precise historical conditions since its value fluctuates over time along with the markets. What remain constant are the conditions that determine its price.⁶⁴ Thirdly, the work 'defies the dictates of the art market', according to which a product is bought at the price of its value: because the *Artist's Shit* is arbitrarily treated as a luxury commodity, this creates a disruption of market regulations.⁶⁵ Therefore, Manzoni replaces one system of exchange-value with the other. If we analyse this work with reference to the Labour Theory of Value, human biological functions also become commodified because they facilitate the labour required to produce a certain good. Moreover, *Artist's Shit* increases the gap between use-value and exchange-value, since it has no use-value at all.⁶⁶

In line with discourses on the capitalist market economy and the design industry, Manzoni gives attention to the aesthetics of the packaging: *Artist's Shit* cans not only declare what it is supposed to be inside box in four

scatola.' Romano F. Cattaneo, "Il Barattolo dell'Arte, Un campione del Nostro Tempo," *Il Borghese*, September 21, 1961, 100, my translation.

⁶⁴ By conditions I mean that the faeces had to be sold at the same price of the gold.

⁶⁵ McGrath, "Body, Subject," Self 16, footnote 22.

⁶⁶ See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Frederick Engels, ed., Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, trans. (New York: Appleton and Co., 1889)

languages – Italian, English, German and French – in black words on a yellow background, but also the name and surname of the author are written as one word across their surface. In turn this creates a discrepancy between the fetishism of the artist's traces and the serial mass production of an item that jeopardises the originality of the product itself. Notably, the narrative of a mass consumer society, which framed and fostered the creation of this work, encourages us to put *Artist's Shit* in dialogue with Andy Warhol's series of *Campbell's Soup Cans* made only one year later in 1962 [fig. 0.10]. The depiction of tinned goods and also the reproduction of them in series create an undeniable parallelism between the two works, since they provoke a similar commentary on the contemporaneous system of production. However, while Warhol chooses a cheap and low quality product already available for sale and elevates it to the status of an icon, Manzoni sought to insert into the global market a product that was as yet uncommodified – human faecal waste.

Drawing upon the legacy of Duchamp (another influence shared by Manzoni and Oiticica), the Italian artist builds upon the French artist's mockery, materialising the use of the *urinal*. In a 1959 interview, Manzoni affirms:

The Dadaists put a moustache on *La Gioconda* and at the first hesitant exhibition of abstract sculpture they submitted a representation of toilets. At the exhibition of the much feared abstract art in 1913 [sic] in New York, the Dada group sent the porcelain parts of a urinal. Bidets and chamber-pots have been acquired, and even today are conserved, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam and the Galleria dell'Arte Informale in Liegi. I have a rare piece; would you like to buy it?⁶⁷

As Gerald Silk recounts, when asked by Edouard Manet what he would submit to the Salon of 1870, Paul Cézanne replied 'a pot of shit'.⁶⁸ Beyond the evident irreverence, Cézanne's answer exemplifies the canonical dichotomy between 'high art and low shit', an opposition reversed by Manzoni's project.⁶⁹ Notably,

⁶⁷ Piero Manzoni interviewed by Wladimiro Greco, "8 Domande al Pittore Piero Manzoni," *Il Travaso*, October 5, 1959, translated by J.T. McGrath.

⁶⁸ See Maurice Denis, *Journal*, 3 vols. (Paris: La Colombe, 1957-59), 2: 212.

⁶⁹ See Gerald Silk, "Myths and Meanings in Manzoni's Merda d'Artista," *Art Journal* 52, 3 (1993): 66.

Uruguayan artist and art critic Luis Camnitzer outlines the legacy of Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* in both Latin American art and poetry, even if his reading is based on a rather narrow understanding of it.⁷⁰ According to Camnitzer, although Manzoni 'filled his cans aiming to insult', the success of the work meant that it lost its 'terrorist quality'.⁷¹ As demonstrated above, and in contrast to what Camnitzer claims, the cans were made by Manzoni not as acts of aggressive iconoclasm but in order to achieve commercial success. The shocking effect intended by this project has prompted scholars to define Manzoni as a Neo-Dadaist. However, the issues at stake in Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* go beyond the significance of a merely insulting or sarcastic gesture.⁷² While both Duchamp's *Readymades* and Oiticica's *Bólides* sought to limit the artist's intervention through the use of pre-fabricated objects that make the work seem almost anonymous, Manzoni's work is in this respect more ambivalent. Although he certainly ridicules the idolatry attached to traces of the artist by the market and the public, he never actually undermines the artist's sovereignty. A similar observation is true for Manzoni's *Living Sculptures* (1961) [fig. 0.11] and *Bodies of Air* (1961) [fig. 0.12], both works that blur the boundaries between the artist's authorship and the audience's intervention.⁷³

As has been shown, Manzoni's ninety cans of *Artist's Shit* resist an unequivocal interpretation, instead producing a multiplicity of meanings and references that defy a limited approach. Manzoni, Oiticica and Manuel – among others – all adopt the prototype of the box, but each underscores different aspects of it. By employing glass containers, Oiticica plays at fusing the inside with the outside: the light reflected on the jug spreads the pigments of colour contained in it across the air, which makes the object appeal to the tactile gaze of the audience. Similarly Manuel's *Urns* demand to be handled violently by the audience: by breaking the boxes, the public discloses their

⁷⁰ See Luis Camnitzer, Rachel Weiss (ed.), *On Art, Artists, Latin America and other Utopias*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 178.

⁷¹ Ibid. Moreover, the work maintained its shocking effect even in following years: in 1972 Palma Bucarelli, former director of the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, was harshly criticised for having exhibited the *Artist's Shit*.

⁷² See Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, "Manzoni, un Dada Italiano," *Avanti!*, January 22, 1967, 6; "Una grande mostra Dada a Milano. L'elogio della Follia di Piero Manzoni," *Avanti!*, August 20, 1966, 3.

⁷³ See chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.

contents and thus activates their meaning. By contrast, Manzoni's cans are sealed and are intended to remain closed. However, the description of their contents still generates in the audience a feeling of revulsion and disgust. Hidden from the audience's sight, the content of the cans exists on a purely conceptual level; the buyer cannot verify what is inside. The series of the *Artist's Shit* follows on from the artist's preceding works and anticipates the later ones. Manzoni's process of creation is, in this respect, very close to Oiticica's in the way that traditional themes merge with new experimental elements.⁷⁴ Playing on a similar theme Manzoni's *Lines* (1960) [fig. 0.13] are preserved in sealed tubes of black and red cardboard.⁷⁵ 'Recently I have executed a line of infinite length' Manzoni declared, 'but this one has also a defect. It is necessary to keep the tube that contains it perfectly closed, because if you open it, the line will disappear'.⁷⁶ This forces the audience into a position of dependence on the artist. In this manner Manzoni maintains his unquestioned authorship.

There is another series of works in which Manzoni employs the box: the subseries of the *Achromes* with boxes, named *Pacchi* (*Packages*) [fig. 0.14]. These 'trans-objects' – in between the pictorial and the sculptural dimensions – are made of objects wrapped in brown paper, tied up with strings of twine, sealed with wax and lead crests, and mounted on a white canvas.⁷⁷ In resembling traditional parcels, the *Pacchi* demonstrate Manzoni's fascination for different kinds of commercial boxes (specifically canned goods and parcels) and for issues of conceptual negation and aesthetic withdrawal. Once again the parcels attached to the middle of the canvas appear to be sealed and removed from the audience's touch. Scholar McGrath analyses this series in relation to both international influences (comparing them to Christos' packages) and local influences (considering them in view of the traditional use

⁷⁴ This statement doesn't aim to justify the comparison between the two, but only to emphasise a similar attitude of their process of making: as said above, the analysis of both B17 *Bólido 5* and *Artist's Shit* is not meant to suggest a comparison between the two artists.

⁷⁵ The *Lines* were heavily criticised in the Italian press at that time. See for example Leonardo Borgese, "Al di là dell'estermo astrattismo. Il pittore che "crea" linee a metratura," *Corriere della Sera*, December 16, 1959, 3.

⁷⁶ Piero Manzoni quoted in McGrath, *The body, the Subject, the Self*, 290.

of *cera lacca* in Italy to seal packages and important documents). Beyond Christo, there are several artists and works across the twentieth century that can be compared with Manzoni's *Pacchi*: May Ray's *L'Énigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (1920), Maurice Lemaître's *Sculpture Inimaginable* (1964), Stephen Kantelbach's *Time Capsule* (1970) and Ray Johnson's *Untitled [sealed box]* (1970), among others. Striking similarities can also be found between both Manzoni's *Lines* and *Pacchi* and Ben Vautier's *Boîtes Mystères* (from 1960) [fig. 0.15], a series of sealed wooden boxes which display on their top surfaces sentences saying 'this box loses its value and aesthetic significance as a work of art (mystery) in the moment it is opened'. Vautier explains the genesis of these works as follows:

One day I found a white rusty iron and sealed box. This box contained something that I could not identify because I was unable to open it. That day, I crystallised the beauty of unknown contents by creating my mystery boxes.⁷⁸

Like Manzoni's *Lines*, these boxes work by concealing their contents. Yet the contents they hide do not matter either to the author or to the audience: the objects are simply 'mystery boxes', just as Manzoni's *Pacchi* are simply parcels for posting. McGrath argues that by attaching a sealed parcel on a canvas, Manzoni aims to interrupt any communicative process with the viewer.⁷⁹ While I subscribe to the interpretation of these works as responding to a process of negation and aesthetic withdrawal, we might ask whether the employment of parcels has a particular significance. In the context of Manzoni's production, the *Pacchi* are just another sub-series within the series of the *Achromes*. *Achromes* (1957-1962) [fig. 0.16] are the wall-like uncoloured canvases that Manzoni made in different shapes and format across five years. *Achromes* therefore chronicle the evolution that characterises

⁷⁷ Here I am deliberately adopting Oiticica's term 'trans-object' to show how such a specific definition could be taken out of context and used to describe Manzoni's work as well.

⁷⁸ 'Un jour j'ai découvert une boîte en fer blanc rouillée et hermétiquement fermée. Cette boîte contenait quelque chose que je ne pus identifier car je fus incapable de l'ouvrir. Ce jour-là, je cristallisai la beauté de l'ignorance d'un contenu, en créant mes boîtes mystères.' Ben Vautier, *Tout Ben* (Paris: Édition du Chêne, 1974), 29, my translation.

⁷⁹ McGrath, *The Body, the Subject, the Self*, 296-310.

Manzoni's oeuvre across time. In particular, they demonstrate an increasing obsession firstly with the nature of the materials employed – investigated with an alchemic approach similar to that of Oiticica – and secondly with the materiality of the canvas itself. Between 1957 and 1959, the surface of the *Achromes* is never smooth or uniform in either colour or texture. Rather the surface is either moulded into folds and waves, or stitched together to form a grid. Later Manzoni begins to experiment through his choice of both natural and synthetic fibres, by varying colour and by *objectifying* the flatness of the canvas, which is to say, turning the canvas itself into an object. Therefore the *Pacchi* can be explained through the lens of this process of progressive materialisation, in which the surface of the canvas reaches a hybrid state in between painting and sculpture.

By analysing one work by each artist I have raised and discussed several issues: what is the relation between these works and contemporary artistic practices? What is the link between these works and the cultural and economic context in which they emerged? Are there recurring patterns that we can identify in Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice respectively? Problematizing these and other points I wanted to emphasise how each series of works emerges within a coherent conceptual development that affects the particular artist's process of making. Concurrently, I suggested that both art objects similarly resist univocal interpretations since they allow a multiplicity of reading, that unfold their ambiguity. On this matter my approach resonates a certain understanding of the 'word' that French writer and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) develops in his seminal book *Writing Degree Zero* (1953); both Manzoni's can and Oiticica's box have characteristics like to the ones ascribed by Barthes to the 'word'. I shall discuss more of Barthes in the next section, but for now it is important to note how Barthes affirms that in modern poetry there is 'a void necessary for the density of the word to rise out of magic vacuum, like a sound and a sign devoid of background, like "fury and mystery"'.⁸⁰ He continues by explaining the 'essentialism' of the word:

⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 47.

The Word is encyclopaedic, it contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose. It therefore achieves a state which is possible only in the dictionary or in poetry – places where the noun can live without its article – and is reduced to a sort of degree zero, pregnant with all past and future specifications.⁸¹

The word is therefore polyvalent, full of possibilities of signification, but equally emerges from a zone of resistance that is a blank space. Likewise, Manzoni and Oiticica's works incorporate a multiplicity of meanings and simultaneously achieve a zone of silence – a void necessary for these meanings to sprout. As I shall argue later, in the attempt to challenge classical art and in 'zeroing' what has come before them, Manzoni's and Oiticica's works burst on the artistic scene as 'unexpected objects', 'Pandora's box from which to fly out all the potentialities' of realisation and signification.⁸² The notion of degree zero is therefore very important in substantiating the metaphorical dialogue I establish between both artists, together with the idea of the 'constructive' that I borrow from Martins.

Rising from 'zero', Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* and Oiticica's *Bólides* challenge fixed methodologies, and fixed aesthetic, conceptual, and historiographical categories.⁸³ This in turn encapsulates the twofold aim of this thesis: to critique the dominant Western historiographical categorisation of some twentieth century art practices and to re-frame these practices through the open concept of 'degree zero' art.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 48.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ As argued in the literature review, the two artists had mainly been analysed in their respective contexts only, dismissing a transnational perspective that would investigate these practices on a horizontal axis. Moreover, general literature on the sixties had hardly considered Manzoni and Oiticica together – with the exception of catalogues Jane Farver et al., eds., *Global Conceptualism: points of origins, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, available through D.A.P., 1999) and Okwui Enwezor et al, eds., *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-1965* (Munich and New York: Haus der Kunst and Prestel, 2016) – and had insisted on different tropes, for example stigmatising conceptualism in light of certain patterns (see for example Lucy Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997]).

⁸⁴ On top of the literature mentioned in the footnote n.40, I would like to be reminder of the 'temporary blindness' of North American critique in respect of Manzoni's oeuvre. In 2008 a number of October on Italian postwar art was published edited by Glair Gilman and including articles written by American scholars only: none of the collected articles was dedicated to Manzoni. More mistakes can be found among American scholarship: an important text book that has tried to frame and

3. Zero point(s)

As I shall demonstrate, thinking of Manzoni and Oiticica together often generates pairs of contraries. However, these artists shared an important attribute: both considered their work to be ahead of their times, commenting on issues developed by later trends. The range of shifts displayed by their practice – practice that responds to a ‘zero aesthetics’ – informs my project. My interpretation of ‘zero’ is only partially borrowed from the German Zero Group’s understanding of it. ‘ZERO is the incommensurable zone in which the old state turns into the new’ they affirmed, thus implying a new beginning that overthrows the current state of the arts.⁸⁵ Manzoni, who exhibited with both the German Zero Group and the Dutch Nul Group was already familiar with it. Equally, I am indebted to Roland Barthes for understanding ‘zero’ as expressing the polivalency of a work of art.

This thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part I define the category of zero to frame Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s work. In the second part, I use Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s projects to propose a new reading of important sites of recent art-historical and art-critical discourse, participation and politics. One aim of this thesis is to offer a historiographical reappraisal of the critical literature on these two artists. I will do this by examining both primary sources and secondary texts. In deconstructing dominant discourses I aim to build a new interpretative framework that acts not as a fixed structure but as an open model of investigation. A ‘zero’ model of analysis explores the tension at stake in both artists’ practice. I shall explain the significance of this tension later in

analysed twentieth Century *Art, Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (ed. by Benjamin H. Buchloh et al., London: Thames&Hudson, 2016) mentions Manzoni only briefly, and together with Fontana and Burri and displays fallacious statements. For example, Yves Alain-Bois affirms that ‘Both the Gutai group in Japan and Piero Manzoni’s *Lines* depend on Pollock’ (p. 412), not supporting the argument with any evidence. Later in the text the scholar affirms: ‘Manzoni’s Achromes seem only to conjure a genuine admiration for Klein (though the definitive censure of color could already be interpreted as a poke at Klein’s grandiloquent aesthetics, largely based on the spectacular effects of chromatic saturation). Soon however, Manzoni’s vast array of white works would point in the direction of Klein’s ultimate nemesis, that is, marcel Duchamp, and thence return to Fontana in order to sharpen his negative lesson’ (p. 476). Such a statement reiterates an old-fashioned scholarship that sees Manzoni in the same manner as Klein, Fontana, and Duchamp. In the aforementioned book Oiticica is mentioned briefly too, as part of the Neoconcrete movement and fellow artist of Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape.

this introduction. To begin, I shall illustrate my understanding of ‘zero’ as interpretative aesthetics, departing from the work of Barthes.

Barthes gave the most significant critical account of the notion of ‘degree zero’ in both *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and in *Mythologies* (1957). In adopting Barthes’ theory, I want to illustrate the sense I attribute to the label ‘degree zero’, an idea that plays a fundamental role in my thesis. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes analyses ‘writing’ in its process of vanishing. According to Barthes, ‘writing’ is an element of speech autonomous from language and style but mutually linked to history and literature. In this narrative on writing, Barthes introduces the idea of a ‘degree zero’, which he considers in part in relation to Albert Camus’s novel (*The Stranger* (1955). Camus’ writing is neutral and minimalist, and as such is in contrast to both colloquial and literary language. To reach the utopian state of a ‘degree zero’, writing needs to be released from its fixed structures and from the formalities that belong to the language of the bourgeoisie, as if seeking non-ideological meaning.

Barthes develops a ‘zero’ narrative again in *Mythologies*, firstly concerning Abbé Pierre’s haircut and secondly in reference to myth today as a ‘stolen language’. The ‘zero haircut’, according to Barthes, becomes the ‘label of Franciscanism’: it is a haircut devoid of ‘affectation and above all of definitive shape’ and is subsequently ‘completely outside the bound of art and even of technique’.⁸⁶ This kind of haircut develops into a mythological iconography. In turn, myth is defined by Barthes as ‘stolen language’: ‘What is characteristic of myth?’ To transform a meaning into form; Barthes defines myth as ‘language-robbery’. In the section on myth, Barthes touches once again upon the concept of ‘zero degree’, this time in reference to the indicative tense that in contrast to the subjunctive and the imperative does not express any will or request. He continues by saying that ‘a fully constituted myth is never a “zero degree”’ and that in turn ‘it would be only a zero degree which could resist myth’.⁸⁷ Therefore, in the case of Abbé Pierre’s haircut – which acts as the signifier of a spectrum of values recognised by a certain community –

⁸⁵ Piene, “The development of the Group Zero,” 3.

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 47

‘zero’ is the prerequisite for the constitution of a ‘myth’. However, Barthes later rejects this understanding in the section on myth as stolen language, where ‘degree zero’ is not what constitutes myth, but what resists it.

It can be inferred that Barthes develops a non-linear, dialectic understanding of ‘degree zero’. This becomes evident if we take a closer look at *Writing degree Zero*, a book that constitutes a challenge to Jean Paul Sartre’s (*What is Literature?*), even to the extent that Sartre’s first chapter and Barthes’ first section carry the same title – *What is writing?* In Sartre’s book, prose literature is considered different from any other artistic form ‘by virtue of its means’, language, and possesses the inner task of ‘communicating’. The writer is therefore a fundamentally social figure with an ethical end since, Sartre affirms, ‘art has never been on the side of the purists’ and ‘literature is in essence a taking of positions’, by which he means the expression of (political) commitment.⁸⁸ Barthes borrows from Sartre the division between language and style but rethinks another category, that of writing: if the first two are ‘objects’, writing is a ‘function’. Barthes’ snapshot on writing, his call for a ‘white writing’, purged of mannerism and of style, is the antidote to the disintegration of literary language. Barthes also explores the state of contemporary language in respect to classical language such that *Writing Degree Zero* becomes the manifesto of Modern literary language. Barthes’ understanding of degree zero undergoes a certain metamorphosis in the book, as if the concept is constructed in permanent tension. The first mention of a degree zero writing appears in the introduction:

In those neutral modes of writing, called here ‘the degree zero of writing’, we can easily discern a negative momentum, and an inability to maintain it within time’s flow, as if Literature, having tended for a hundred years now to transmute its surface into a form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity but in the absence of all signs, finally proposing the realization of this Orphean dream: a writer without Literature. Colourless writing like Camus’s, Blanchot’s or Cayrol’s, for example, or conventional writing like Queneau’s, represents the last

⁸⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 131

⁸⁸ Sartre quoted by Susan Sontag, “Preface,” in Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, xii.

episode of a passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness.⁸⁹

As can be inferred from this paragraph, those neutral modes of writing that Barthes discusses have here a slightly negative connotation, what he calls ‘negative momentum’; there is no longer hope for ‘literature’ to achieve such purity, and the purity that neutral writing achieves is a privative one. In another section of the book - *Is there any poetic writing?* - Barthes explores the ancient distinction between prose and classical poetry: poetry is equal to the summa of prose plus certain attributes of language, such as metre, rhyme or what he calls the ‘ritual of images’.⁹⁰ If this old distinction does not however jeopardise the unity of language, nothing of this division remains in modern poetry, since according to Barthes:

Poetry is then no longer a prose either ornamental or short of liberties. It is a quality *sui generis* and without antecedents. It is not longer an attribute but a substance, and therefore it can very well renounce signs, since it carries its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly.⁹¹

Indeed, as I have explained above, he attributes to the poetic word specific connotations, qualifying it as an entity dense of significance rising from a zone of emptiness. The void becomes the blank space deprived of a background, a space necessary for the word to manifest itself in all its multiple meanings. According to Barthes the word thus symbolises a ‘degree zero’ that possesses here – and in contrast to what was sustained in the introduction – a positive value, a ‘constructive’ momentum instead of a ‘negative’ one. The word is therefore at once reduced *ad minimum* but ‘pregnant with all past and future specifications’; it enacts a constructive dialectic. Moreover, since modern poetry according to Barthes destroys relationships and makes the words ‘static things’, this implies a change in our ‘knowledge of nature’: ‘nature becomes a fragmented space, made of objects solitary and terrible, because the links

⁸⁹ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 5.

⁹⁰ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 41.

⁹¹ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 43.

between them are only potential'.⁹² This description in turn reflects the postmodern era in which Barthes writes and the practice of Oiticica and Manzoni flourish: the word in its essentialism is, I think, emblematic of this new era.

Lastly, 'degree zero' pops up again towards the end of the book in the chapter on 'writing and silence'. Here, Barthes gives a precise account of degree zero writing:

In this same attempt towards disengaging literary language, here is another solution: to create a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language. [...] Proportionally speaking, writing at the zero degree is basically in the indicative mood, or if you like amodal [...] The new neutral writing takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgements, without becoming involved in any of them; it consists precisely in their absence.⁹³

From this description we can identify two main points: one is that Barthes insists on the importance of the indicative as the 'zero degree' mode, something that he will discuss again in *Mythologies* and that becomes one of the distinguishing traits of this 'journalistic' way of writing. Secondly, Barthes describes 'writing degree zero' as 'colourless'. This adjective is also particularly significant in defining Manzoni's *Achromes* that, I argue, reach a 'degree zero' of expression: being tautological structures, they don't seek to express judgements or assert value. "Colourless" is nevertheless a deliberately neutral term. What is the value of such 'neutrality'? Is Barthes referring again to a 'negative momentum' in writing or is he expressing its polyvalency, which holds within 'past and future specifications'? Barthes asserts:

This transparent form of speech, initiated by Camus's *Outsider*, achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style; writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form.⁹⁴

⁹² Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 50.

⁹³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 76.

Degree zero writing is again defined as absence, negation, and inertia, but actively resisting ‘myth’, as Barthes will further explain in *Mythologies*. However, despite diverse understandings, Barthes account of degree zero does not, I think, contradict itself; it is substantiated by a dialectical discourse that generates inner tensions in the conceptualisation of a zero aesthetics itself. Indeed, as Barthes concludes, ‘nothing is more fickle than a colourless writing’, nodding to the deliberate instability of this concept and its possible manifestations.⁹⁵

Adopting Barthes’s conceptualisation of language and literature to analyse the plastic arts, it is necessary for me to develop my own analysis that concerns a different field. One problem is that Barthes’ concept of ‘zero degree’ is related strictly to writing, since in his book he refers to a specific group of writers and literary styles. Moreover, while both language and art are systems of signs conveying meanings that vary according to their combination, they work by following distinct sets of rules so that what carries significance in ‘language’ does not necessarily do so in the visual arts. However, I believe Barthes’ understanding of ‘degree zero’ is very useful to my dissertation: just as I have argued that ‘degree zero writing’ is founded on an undeniable tension, which makes it difficult to pin down, similarly I believe Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s different explorations of a degree zero art unfolds its dialectical and paradoxical nature. For example, Manzoni’s *Achromes* are colourless and therefore neutral, but since they engage with different materials, they possess a tactile appeal too. Therefore these works nod to modernist tradition, but simultaneously retain bodily features characteristic of the postmodern era. Similarly Oiticica’s *Paragolés* are ground-breaking objects: starting from a zone of emptiness, these capes are intentionally willing to take a step further from previous artistic experience. At the same time, they enclose references to the past, to folkloric traditions, to the native population, and work as a ‘literary language that might emulate the naturalness of social languages’.⁹⁶ Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s practices display a ‘degree zero’ which is as paradoxical as

⁹⁴ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 77.

⁹⁵ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 78.

Barthes': they aim to defeat traditional aesthetic and artistic values, while performing a constructive re-visioning of possibilities.

The constructive will ascribed to both artists' projects emerges in the development from one series of works to the next. In Oiticica's practice this is evident in his progression from geometric abstraction – influenced by the works of Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich – and the formulation of an 'environmental art' as defined by Mario Pedrosa.⁹⁷ In this change from one style to another, an important role is played by the *Série Branca* (*White Series*, 1959) [fig. 0.17] which is located in between the two styles. Drawing on Malevich's empty canvases, these white paintings sought to express a degree zero aesthetics that, I argue, is fully materialised only a few years later in the *Parangolé* capes.

The *Parangolé* capes are colourful robes, banners and tents, made to be worn by Samba dancers living in the favelas. They epitomise Oiticica's desire to find a compromise between tradition and innovation – a key issue for Brazilian modernism, from the Anthropophagic movement onwards. Rooted in their national context, *Parangolé* is an anti-artistic work par excellence: disrupting traditional aesthetic categories, it resists the labels of 'painting', 'sculpture' and 'architecture', while also challenging the notion of the 'museum', understood as the institution that validates certain aesthetic hierarchies. At the same time it seeks a compromise with folklore and tradition because it comes from the specific socio-political background of the favelas, as well as from the culture of samba. Therefore, from a socio-political perspective, this work attempts a 'democratisation' of society by making 'visible' the 'invisible' Afro-Brazilian population settled on the hills of Rio de Janeiro. From an aesthetic point of view, this objective relates to Oiticica's intention to emancipate Brazilian art from the influence of European modernism and thereby creates something new on a transnational scale but with an indigenous Brazilian voice. *Parangolé* is a 'zero' work of art because

⁹⁶ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 83.

⁹⁷ Mario Pedrosa, "Environmental Art, Postmodern Art, Hélio Oiticica," accessed August 31, 2016. URL: <http://post.at.moma.org/sources/28/publications/278>, originally published as "Arte ambiental, arte pós-moderna, Hélio Oiticica," *Correio da manhã*, June 26, 1966.

the possible comparison with earlier artistic example wouldn't be fully productive in understanding the characteristics and the challenges engaged by this work. Additionally, it prompts the enactment of a novel participatory way of engaging with art practices; it emerges from the blankness of the white series, attempting to destroy the art that has preceded it, yet it looks to negotiate with local traditions.

Regarding Manzoni, his oeuvre features the conflict between the survival of the lyrical symbolism of his early works and the void emerging from the *tabula rasa* delivered by his white monochromes (*Achromes*). Here the mechanism of erasing and rebuilding from scratch comes into play again; this follows a movement that is analogous to the one which features in Oiticica's practice. I argue that the 'zero' turning point, that is to say the shift between representation and the pictorial *tabula rasa*, occurs with the creation of the *Achromes*. What is striking about the *Achromes* is that they manifest the same constructive attitude exemplified by Oiticica's *Parangolé*. *Achromes* are not simply white monochromes but 'autonomous organisms' growing within their surroundings in a paradoxical, tautological way. Indeed, according to Manzoni, they resist any contact or engagement with the viewer as well as any super-imposed aesthetic quality. The *Achromes* have a twofold objective: to make a *tabula rasa* of what has come before them and to establish a 'degree zero' ground of infinite possibilities of creation. What was merely the medium for conveying meaning, the canvas, is now a work of art, a myth or a meaning in and of itself. These surfaces of pure white are unrelated to any gesture that belongs to the artist's intimacy and, at the same time, respond to Manzoni's urge to experiment with materiality. The artist erases every pictorial trace from the canvas in order to reach a 'zero state'. Subsequently, he adds various new materials to its surface, while also avoiding the reference to any symbolism. The tautological or self-referential narrative maintained by these works makes possible the institutionalisation of anti-aesthetics.

As outlined above, the politics of making of both these artists, stretched in between these tensions, prompts the emergence of a series of 'zero points'. In this manner 'zero' stands in opposition to 'nihilism', because it signifies an

aesthetics of construction. Because of the constructive will ascribed to this aesthetics, zero also reciprocates the post-war desire of reconstruction. Therefore the idea of a 'degree zero art' not only substantiates the dialogue between Manzoni and Oiticica by linking them both to a more general post-war awareness, but it also elucidates the purpose at stake in their practice, which is to erase and rebuild forms and meanings from a zone of silence, producing new meanings while still retaining traditional or vernacular elements. Accordingly this thesis will discuss and articulate such a paradox, using the notion of zero as the interpretative frame of the dialectic that is enacted differently in the work of Manzoni and Oiticica.

4. Outline of Chapters

This thesis is divided into two parts: part I comprises chapters one and two, and part II comprises chapters three and four. The division in two parts is necessary for a better understanding of the material that constitutes this thesis. The first part reframes Manzoni's and Oiticica's projects in light of the 'zero' open model. Each chapter discusses one artist at time and the way in which his practice responds to a degree zero aesthetics. The *Achromes* and the *Parangolé* capes are interpreted as examples of degree zero art. The second part deals more with the socio-political background, and it critically addresses discourses around participation and politics through the lens of Manzoni's and Oiticica's projects. Both artists' practices prompt a novel understanding of hegemonic interpretations of such discourses.

With reference to Manzoni's work and the Italian context, chapter one establishes a narrative around the leitmotiv of zero as an aesthetics of construction that emerges from a conflict between different media and values. Accordingly I shall investigate how Manzoni's practice was influenced by the Italian cultural scene of the beginning of the fifties, as expressed by the 'Nuclear Movement', its style and its values. My purpose is to examine Manzoni's emancipation from this scene which led him to attain a 'zero state' in his work through the institutionalisation of an anti-aesthetic dimension

involving the refusal of the symbols, visions and values inherited from modernist art. The *Achromes* are therefore the main focus of this first chapter and they will be scrutinised from multiple perspectives: as examples of post-modern dystopias; as symptomatic of an obsession for science and materiality; and as organic creatures that mimic the appearance of the wall to deliver a *tabula rasa* of invention. In parallel with Oiticica's description of *Parangolé* capes as expressions of an 'anti-artistic' stance (a discourse that will inform the second chapter), I acknowledge Manzoni's *Achromes* as a paradoxical institutionalisation of an anti-aesthetics. Multiple primary and secondary sources are adopted in this chapter. In particular my argument will engage critically with Briony Fer's chapter *Series* in the book *Infinite Line* by examining her understanding of seriality with respect to Manzoni's works.⁹⁸

Chapter two investigates the idea of the neo-avant-garde in reference to Oiticica's practice. Building upon the debate on the risk of an inappropriate use of western art historical categories, I shall discuss both notions of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde as applied to an 'underdeveloped' country. In this context, I shall analyse Brazilian modernism in its various phases, establishing a narrative around the idea of zero that engenders a novel understanding of Oiticica's work both in terms of 'anti-art' and in the light of an 'aesthetics of construction'. Ultimately, I will focus on Oiticica's *Parangolé* as an expression of zero and as a means of construction, which is symptomatic of the tensions outlined above. Despite the scepticism I maintain towards the conceptual frameworks of her contributions, chapter one is indebted to scholar Mari Carmen Ramírez, particularly to the exhibition *Inverted Utopias* that she curated in 2004, which promoted a 'revolutionary' understanding of contemporary art from Latin America analysed through a range of themes. My second important set of sources for this chapter includes Oiticica's own writings. This is not to slavishly embrace the artist's point of view, but to give a more accurate account of the way he constructed his own teleology and to what extent this is, in turn, reflected in his practice.

⁹⁸ Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art after Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Chapter three discusses participation in the practice of both Manzoni and Oiticica. Participation comes into play according to the dialectic of ‘erasing’ and ‘rebuilding’ that informs both artists’ practice, reflecting the attitude of ‘sublating’ the past to start from scratch, or from ‘zero’. Furthermore, the dismantling of the barriers between author and spectator envisaged in much contemporary literature reciprocates political and economic changes that occurred both in Italy and Brazil at the beginning of the sixties. Nevertheless, Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s engagement with their audiences is embedded in diverse theoretical approaches and takes place according to contrasting models. As a matter of fact, my juxtaposition of their participatory works generates several pairs of conflicting concepts: dance versus stillness, empathy versus alienation, and collectivity versus individuality. Consequently I adopt Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* (1962) – which became popular in Brazil after its translation into Portuguese in 1968 – as a literary source to shed light on these dichotomies. Approaching this theme from the standpoint of a semiological analysis is important because it allows the coexistence of multiple readings of the work, which is conceived as ‘open’. My main concern is to stress the relation of consumption between the work and the public (or its ‘user’). For Eco, this leads to a twofold division of the role of the participant of the work: the ‘executor’ who physically experiences the work and the ‘user’ who has only an aesthetic engagement with it. Within this dichotomy, the participation of the audience prompts different outcomes in the work of each artist. Manzoni denies any physical experience of the work but still allows an intellectual engagement with it as he makes the audience aware of the limits of participatory practice itself. Thereby he disrupts any equation between participation and democratisation of the art system. In this respect Oiticica’s practice still maintains the utopic avant-garde desire to actually emancipate the role of the public. The risk implicit to Oiticica’s position is an aestheticisation of a minority: the black people of Mangueira dancing samba while wearing the *Parangolé* capes become a vernacular ‘spectacle’ for the gaze of the white bourgeoisie who monopolised the cultural scene.

Drawing upon Edgar Wind's *Art and Anarchy* (published in 1963, originally delivered in the form of lectures in 1960), chapter four addresses the political background, the politics of making and the ways in which Oiticica's and Manzoni's work could or could be not acknowledged as 'political'. My discussion focuses on the notion of anarchy and how it could be employed to frame the practice of both. With respect to Oiticica, my analysis reveals an anarchic aspect in the way he deals with the issue of 'marginality' to the point that the two notions become closely interrelated. Emerging from anarchy, marginality is analysed in reference to both the Brazilian cultural panorama and Oiticica's relation to it, at different registers. I take into consideration three case studies: the 'project Navilouca' (1974), Oiticica's text 'O herói anti-herói, e o anti- herói anônimo' (1965-66) and the exhibition 'Do corpo à terra' (1970). Anarchy in Manzoni's practice translates into a 'politics of freedom' and anti-political commitment. I analyse how this notion of freedom unfolds in Manzoni's practice, particularly with reference both to its definition by Søren Kierkegaard and to how philosophical freedom merges into an anarchic position. To conclude I discuss how anarchy – defined in terms of ontological freedom – affects the practice of art, taking into analysis three series of works and the politics at stake in their production: *Linee* (*Lines*, 1959), *Corpi d'Aria* (*Bodies of Air*, 1959-1960) and *Merda d'Artista* (*Artist's Shit*, 1961).

Illustrations



Fig. 0.1 Hélio Oiticica in front of a poster for the play *Prisoner of Second Avenue*, in Midtown Manhattan, 1972. Facsimile of photograph, César and Claudio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.



Fig.0.2 Piero Manzoni with the *Line long 1000m*. July 24, 1961. Piero Manzoni Foundation.



Fig. 0.3 Hélio Oiticica, *Glass Bólido 05 'Homage to Mondrian'*, 1965, textiles, water, pigment, glass and cork, 30 x 46.5 x 60 cm. Tate collection.



Fig. 0.4 Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé P15, Capa 11, Incorporo a Revolta*, 1967, mixed media. Photo by Cláudio Oiticica .



Fig. 0.5 Antonio Manuel, *Urna Quente* (Hot Ballot Box), 1975, wood, sealing wax, tape, 20 x 60 x 33. Collection of the artist, Rio de Janeiro.

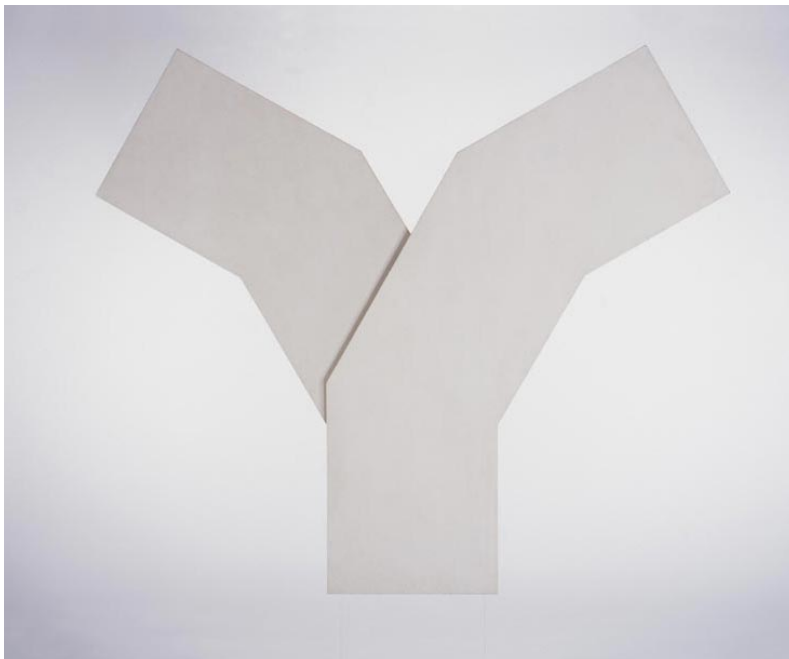


Fig. 0.6 Hélio Oiticica, *Bilateral*, 1959, oil casein emulsion on wood fireboard. César and Claudio Oiticica collection, Rio de Janeiro.



Fig. 0.7 Hélio Oiticica, *Relevo Espacial (vermelho)* (Spatial Relief, Red), 1959, polyvinyl acetate resin on plywood, 62.5 x 148 x 14.3 cm, Tate collection.



Fig. 0.8 Hélio Oiticica, *Grande Núcleo* (Big Nucleus), 1960-66, oil and resin of wood fibreboard. César and Claudio Oiticica collection, Rio de Janeiro.



Fig. 09, Piero Manzoni, *Merda d'Artista* (Artist's Shit), n.66, 1961, can and ink on paper, 4,8 x 6 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.



Fig. 0.10 Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, Synthetic polymer paint on thirty-two canvases, each canvas 50.8 x 40.6 cm. MoMA Collection.



Fig. 0.11 Piero Manzoni during the filming of *Sculpture viventi* (Living Sculptures), Filmgiornale SEDI, in the studio of Giampaolo Maccentelli, Milano. Photo by Giuseppe Bellone



Fig. 0.12 Piero Manzoni, *Corpo d'aria* (Air Body) n. 28, wooden box, rubber balloon, mouthpiece and tripod, 12.4 x 42.7 x 4.8 cm. Private collection, Milan.



Fig. 0.13 Piero Manzoni, *Linea 18.82 m* (Line), 1959, ink on paper and cardboard container, 26.7 x 7 x 7 cm. Tate collection.



Fig. 0.14 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1962, parcel wrapped in packing material, wax and 70 x 85 cm. Private collection, Milan.

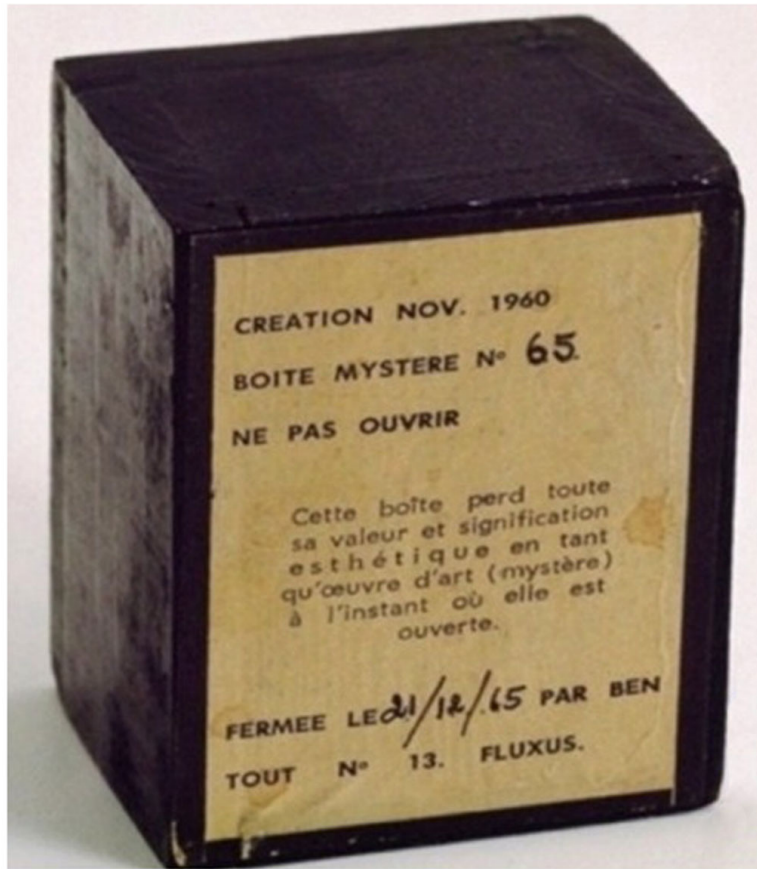


Fig. 0.15 Ben Vautier, *Boîte Mystère* No. 65, 1960, black wooden box with beige printed label, 10 x 7 x 7 cm. Fondazione Bonotto, Molvena (VI).

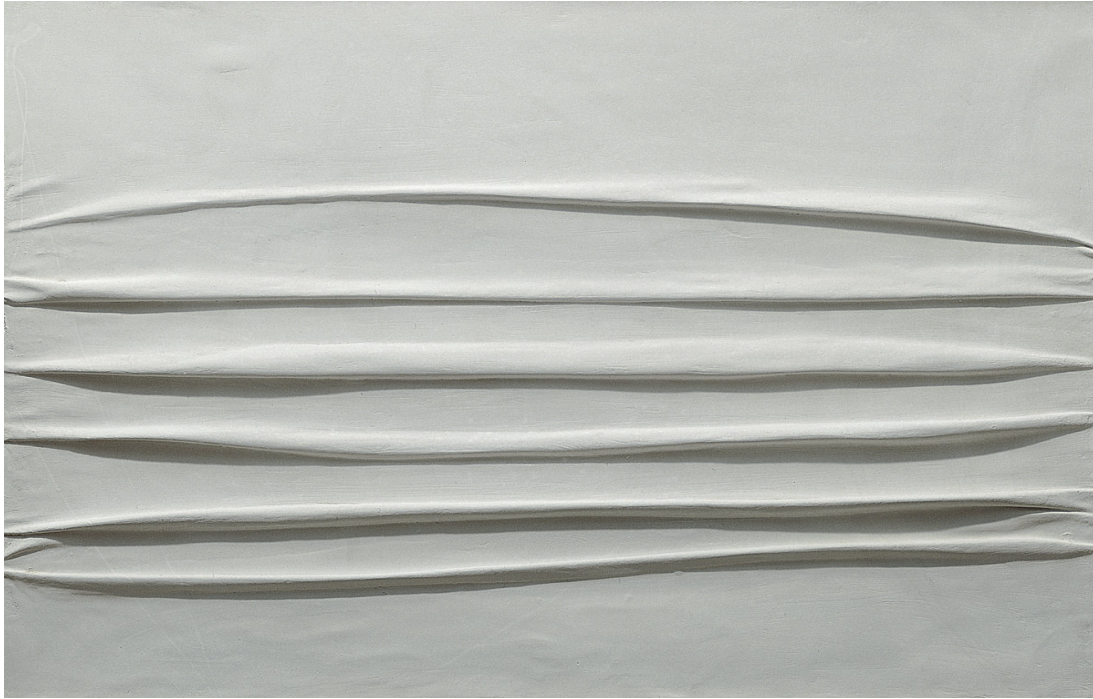


Fig. 0.16 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958, Kaolin on canvas, 50 x 69.5 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.

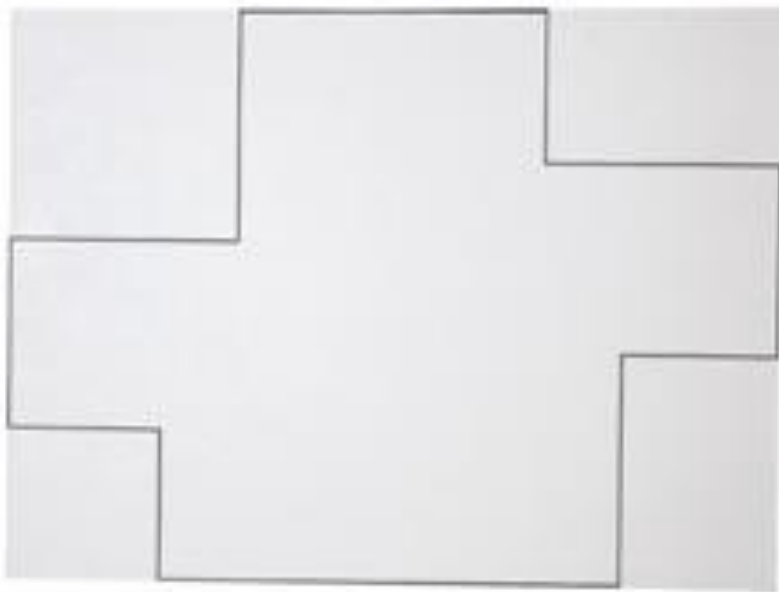


Fig. 0.17 Hélio Oiticica, *Sem título* (série Branca) (Untitled, White Series), 1959, casein mixed with oil on canvas, 97 x 130 cm. Private collection.

Chapter 1

Towards a new criticism of Piero Manzoni:

Nuclear destruction as the postulate of an 'achromatic' *tabula rasa*

Introduction

Ernest: [...] What is the use of art-criticism? Why cannot the artist be left alone, to create a new world if he wishes to, or, if not, to shadow forth the world which we already know, and of which, I fancy, we would each one of us be wearied if Art, with her fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection, did not, as it were, purify it for us, and give to it a momentary perfection. [...] Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? If a man's work is easy to understand, an explanation is unnecessary...

Gilbert: And if his work is incomprehensible, an explanation is wicked.

Ernest: I did not say that.¹

In the essay 'The Critic as Artist' (1890) Oscar Wilde reflects on art criticism, advocating for a 'contemplative life' in place of an 'active one', a trope that is indebted to much classical literature and philosophy.² The essay was originally published as 'The True Functions and Value of Criticism' in the review *Nineteenth Century* and was written by Wilde in response to the criticism that appeared in the press when *Lippincott's Magazine* published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In both essays 'The Critic as Artist' and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', aesthetic concerns are presented as closely linked to political issues because they question power relations: 'Who will judge artists and control their products? [...] Who will judge morality? And who, finally, will control the very language of judgement?'³ I open with this quotation from Wilde for two reasons. Firstly Manzoni and Oiticica both reflected on the art criticism of their respective countries, Italy and Brazil – while Manzoni condemned its

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist, The Soul of Man under Socialism* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2010), 24.

² From Alexandrine philosophy (see for example *De vita contemplativa* by Filone) to Roman literature, the trope of the 'contemplative life' lasted until the monastic culture, as investigated by Jean Leclercq in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*. Translated by Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).

³ See Lawrence Danson, "Wilde's Intentions: the Artist in his Criticism," *Oxford Art Scholarship online* (2012), accessed November 20, 2016, URL: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198186281.001.0001.

conservatism, Oiticica complained about its dependency upon the art market.⁴ Secondly one of the aims of this thesis is to discuss and challenge the function of art criticism - focusing particularly on the mechanisms that have prompted certain receptions of the work of art and its author - and the quote above represent a particularly poignant reflection on this matter.

In this respect, the second part of this chapter analyses scholar Briony Fer's appraisal of the *Achromes*, expanding its premises. By challenging Fer's argument, I shall construct my narrative around the notion of 'zero' and argue that Manzoni's work reflects this ideal of a degree zero aesthetics, which denotes the twofold dialectic of destruction/reconstruction. In shaping this narrative, I shall argue that Manzoni's work shifts from being influenced by the style embraced by the Nuclear movement – affected by the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Jung – to a *tabula rasa* of creation that denies the assumptions of earlier works. I shall demonstrate that Manzoni's approach to a zero aesthetics – as well as to ideas of 'materiality' and 'penetrability' – resonates dialectically with that of Oiticica, whose invocation of a cultural zero informs the following chapter.

Manzoni's *Achromes* symbolise a transition, or a point of erasure between 'nuclear destruction' and aesthetic innovation. Made between 1957 and 1963, *Achromes* witness the employment of different formats and materials, to the point that is almost impossible to describe these chameleon objects from a single perspective. The combination of plaster and kaolin, together with the use of synthetic fibres, wool and fur, makes the label 'monochrome' very reductive.⁵ The use of an astonishing amount of hybrid materials goes hand in hand with the rejection of any superimposed aestheticism. This denial of aesthetic values makes Manzoni's *Achromes* representative of the same notion of zero that features in Oiticica's *Parangolés*.

⁴ See "Oiticica condena atuação dos críticos," *Jornal do Commercio*, July 22, 1979.

⁵ The use of mixed materials characterises the making of Hélio Oiticica's *Série Branca* as well, that indeed does not appear uniformly white. On this matter, Irene Small writes: 'Oiticica mixed and applied his own paints for the *Série Branca*. He frequently combined studio-made casein, an ancient milk-based mixture, with commercial alkydresin [...] the resulting surfaces of Oiticica's *Série Branca* are highly variable [...] the differing applications and levels of pigment saturation result in multiple tonalities of white'. Irene Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), 140.

What I shall call Manzoni's 'anti-aestheticism', together with the tension between the survivals of a lyrical symbolism and the calling for a 'cultural zero' of infinite possibilities of creation, will be the argument at stake in this chapter, based on a narrative that interlaces Manzoni's practice and a degree zero aesthetics. I therefore argue that Manzoni's production undertakes by the end of the fifties a significant shift, moving from the depiction of peculiar imageries that echoed psychoanalytical theories to the representation of nothing, as manifested in the *Achromes*. My ultimate goal would be to assess through the making of the *Achromes* Manzoni's institutionalisation of an anti-aestheticism focusing on three main subjects: 'materiality', 'series', and 'white'.

In order to locate the *Achromes* in a broader context it is necessary to establish a deeper understanding of this series of works. The continuity between these and Manzoni's earlier works is fairly evident, but never fully acknowledged.⁶ The *Achromes* have been analysed both as examples of 'absolute' Art that conform to the 'rhetoric of purity' of modernism's legacy and as exceptional products of Manzoni's artistic genius. In the following paragraphs I will establish the methodology that I will use in this chapter in order to challenge elements of the current critical literature on Manzoni.

In her well-known essay 'Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History', Griselda Pollock points out how certain art historical approaches have marginalised discourses of history, class and ideology.⁷ The art historian observes that 'the subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning; this in turn removes "art" from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the expression of the personality of the artist'.⁸ Focusing on the case of Vincent Van Gogh, Pollock endeavours to rescue the artist from a critical attitude that relies on what she calls a 'popular humanism'. The reason why I quote Pollock is because a discourse similar to hers could be applied to the figure of Manzoni

⁶ Critics like Flaminio Guladoni o Michele Dantini have stressed the aesthetic concerns at stake in the *Achromes* but never fully placed them in a defined lineage, as emerging from Nuclear paintings.

⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History," *Screen* 21 (1980): 57-96.

too. As a matter of fact, even recent publications on the artist are structured around the 'individual' and the 'narrative', revealing understandings of Manzoni as the bohemian, as subversive, extraordinary (in the etymological meaning of 'out of the ordinary') romantic genius.⁹ I am not attempting to dismiss Manzoni's individuality or to totally disregard his 'marginalisation' from his contemporary artistic context; rather I attempt to integrate the analysis of his life and his artistic personality into a wider survey of the historical context to provide the reader with, what I argue should be, a clearer understanding of his work.¹⁰

Due to his early and mysterious death, hagiographic readings have analysed Manzoni's work as informed by an inner 'impulse' towards death that foreshadows his premature passing. Furthermore, from the 1970s onwards, post-war Italian critics have detached the artist from the political context of his time by ascribing to him the 'utopic' role of being the forerunner of subsequent artistic practices.¹¹ This art historical manoeuvre (undertaken by both the hagiographic readings and post-war critics) is even more controversial as it doesn't match the critical misfortune that Manzoni had during his lifetime. Such a construction of Manzoni's artistic persona responds to a certain mainstream literature championed by Germano Celant that now is implemented through the policy of international institutions such as the Gagosian Gallery, which finances all of Manzoni's latest exhibitions. Indeed, Pollock stresses that 'the correlation between the rediscovery of a hitherto unknown artist and the production of a catalogue *raisonné*, a monographic study and the stabilisation of high prices for works by the artist on the art market' is symptomatic of a hegemonic art historical interpretation. This is at times reductive and misleading since it gives privilege to a single perspective, i.e. one based on the artist's life, while not providing a more rounded understanding of his work. I

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ See Falminio Gualdoni, *Piero Manzoni: vita d'artista* (Milano: Johan&Levi, 2013); Francesca Pola, *Piero Manzoni e Zero: una regione creativa europea* (Milano: Electa, 2014).

¹⁰ Ideas of marginalisation and 'self-marginalisation' will come back into play both in chapter 4, to frame Oticica's practice, and in the conclusion.

¹¹ Here I am referring in particular to Germano Celant, who wrote his first monograph on Manzoni in 1975 - Piero Manzoni and Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni Catalogo Generale* (Milano, Prearo,

shall therefore adopt in my analysis an alternative interpretative frame: by comparing and contrasting the work of Manzoni and Oiticica, this frame will create a horizontal dialogue between their practices and thus avoid reliance on hegemonic sites of discourse.¹²

Nikos Papastergiadis suggests an interesting approach: in the essay ‘south-south-south’ the scholar deals with both the utopian and dystopian phenomena of globalisation in the contemporary world, as well as the role of the artist within this context. Papastergiadis advocates the formulation of ‘an alternative cartography for directing the flow of cultural exchange and proposes to initiate new south-south circuits which in themselves pluralise the possibilities of being global.’¹³ To slavishly embrace an approach that discusses art histories from a global perspective alone is not my intention here. The risk of adopting such methodology is to succumb to the opposite contrivance ‘enforcing uniformity or conformity without regard to natural variation of individuality’.¹⁴

Not far from Pollock’s argument is the criticism on the relation between art and socio-political context carried on by art historian Edgar Wind. Because of its detachment from the socio-political sphere, in the sixties Wind denounced current art as missing its original ‘sting’, i.e. a certain ability to inspire the ‘sacred fear’ mentioned by Plato in *The Republic*.¹⁵ Ipso facto, Wind’s thesis makes tacit reference to the avant-garde’s failure to bridge the gap between art and life – an estrangement created by the rise of a new political class, the bourgeoisie, in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Political and aesthetic concerns will be discussed more in depth in the following chapters. However, in the current chapter, I shall investigate both Manzoni’s *Achromes* – proving how through the making of these works

1975). Celant similarly defined Manzoni as having pioneered ‘Arte Povera’, a movement that developed during the late sixties.

¹² Pollock, “Artist, Mythologies,” 63.

¹³ Nikos Papastergiadis, ed. *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference* (London: Rivers Oram, 2003), 14-16.

¹⁴ Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, *Vincent Van Gogh: Artist of His Time* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978); the review was published in *The Burlington Magazine*, 916 (1979).

¹⁵ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1985). The book was firstly published in 1963.

¹⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

Manzoni institutionalised an anti-aesthetic stance – and the historical origins of the Nuclear movement (*Movimento d'Arte Nucleare*, 1952-1959) to which Manzoni briefly belonged at the beginning of his career. Adopting a methodology that aims, whenever possible, to fill the gaps between theory and social engagement, and between aesthetics and politics, my thesis will redefine Manzoni's and Oiticica's work on a transnational axis that links international concerns to the local context. Notably, this chapter will demonstrate how the pictorial destruction pursued by Nuclear painters prompted the creation of the *Achromes*. This chapter will also discuss Manzoni's degree zero art by exploring what this label means and how it functions in relation to Manzoni's work.

The current chapter is structured as follows: in the first part I shall investigate the history of the Nuclear movement, focusing on Enrico Baj's work. The ambiguous faith in scientific discoveries shown by Nuclear artists at the beginning of the fifties gave way to the cynical appraisal of modern technology that emerged at the end of the decade in the last edition of the nuclear review *Il Gesto*. The 'zero' of destruction that echoes the atomic catastrophe and the resurgence of the figure of man advocated by Nuclear painters will be the focus of this section. My aim is to emphasise the influence of the socio-political context on the Nuclear movement, while at the same time addressing themes and styles developed by these artists. I begin with an analysis of the Nuclear movement, discussing in particular the work of Enrico Baj, because they both played an important role in Manzoni's formation as an artist. As I shall demonstrate, the work Manzoni made during the years he exhibited with the Nuclear artists manifested remarkable differences compared to later experiments, yet it greatly inspired the making of his white monochromes. Moreover he had a very fruitful yet, at times, hostile relationship with Baj. The work they made together, *Arrivano gli ultracorpi* (Here come the ultrabodies, 1958) – that portrays a monster walking on a white 'folded' ground – is symptomatic of a post-war feeling of anxiety towards the nuclear threat, yet it exemplifies also the advent of a new pictorial expression: the *Achromes*.

The second section concentrates on the *Achromes*. I shall emphasise both the interplay between the notions of materiality, series, and white and the way in which theoretical categories are reworked by Manzoni's practice. I shall demonstrate that what I qualify as Manzoni's 'anti-aestheticism' constitutes the institutionalisation of an aesthetics that expresses no meaning or values but that employs experimental materials within the realm of art. The concluding section examines the social-political context that qualifies the notion of 'freedom' pursued by Manzoni in some of his works. Notably, the discussion that informs this chapter is mainly based on Briony Fer's book *The Infinite Line* – preeminent within Anglophone literature.

1. The Nuclear Movement

In 1951, two Milan-based artists, Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo released the 'Manifesto della Pittura Nucleare' ('Manifesto of Nuclear Painting') [fig. 1.1] and proclaimed themselves not simply 'Nuclear artists' but 'artists of a nuclear era'. Their Manifesto gained international resonance when it was officially published one year later on the occasion of the Nuclear exhibition at the *Galerie Apollo* in Brussels [fig. 1.2]:

The Nuclearists desire to demolish all the 'isms' of a painting that inevitably lapses into academicism. They want to reinvent Art by disintegrating traditional forms. New men's shapes can be found in the universality of the atom and in its electrical charges. We are not in possession of the truth that can only be found in the atom. We are those documenting the search for this truth [...] the force of gravity will no longer encumber on our minds nor bring us back to the ground because it has been defeated by Nuclear Art, an atomic super fuel for our interplanetary flights.¹⁷

Nuclear artists aimed to subvert the notion of 'style' as it had been understood by traditional academies. The Nuclear movement's undermining of conventional artistic prototypes also reflects its political standpoint. It refuses

to conform to a political agenda or to an art of propaganda that is influenced by the hegemony of a determinate political party, an attitude that prefigures Enrico Baj's later radical anarchic stance. The manifesto displayed also an initial positive and technophilic position towards scientific discoveries, reminder of the tones adopted earlier in the century by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) in the Futurist manifesto (1909) that celebrated the advent of modernity in the beauty of speed, the dynamism of the engines, the celebration of war and so forth. No reference to politics or to fascism can be found in the Nuclear manifesto and in the poetics the movement developed throughout the fifties (similarly, no reference to the fascist regime can be found in the 1909 futurist manifesto because of the obvious temporal gap between this and the advent of the regime). In a period charged with a great anti-fascist spirit among politicians, artists, intellectuals and common people, such as the fifties in Italy, any implication of an affinity between Nuclear theories and fascist positions would sound historically fallacious.¹⁸

In the early fifties Italy was still an underdeveloped rural country. The so-called 'economic miracle' did not occur until 1958. It was preceded by years of profound changes across diverse sectors of Italian society, in particular the rural exodus, urbanisation, the mass increase in literacy and consumerism, which were all dictated by the policy of reconstruction enacted by the European Recovery Programme (ERP). This unstable transformative socio-economical context was also marked by the race for power undertaken by two political parties: the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Communist Party (PC). The DC monopolised the Italian political scene until the 1980s. As Paul Ginsborg observes, from the early fifties onwards 'Italian politics would be characterised by the continuing spectacle of the Christian Democrats searching for political allies, first in the centre and then both the right and the middle'.¹⁹ This strategy of alliances was finalised to preserve the status quo in Italy,

¹⁷ *Manifeste de la peinture Nucléaire*, Galerie Apollo, Bruxelles, February 1, 1952, exhibition curated by Paul Delevoy, republished in Luciano Caramel, *Arte in Italia: 1945-1960* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), 142, my translation.

¹⁸ Marinetti's *Manifesto* was published in the French magazine *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909.

¹⁹ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy, Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 141-142.

which was mainly based on three poles of interest: Catholicism, Americanism, and anti-communism. Despite being excluded from all governing coalitions until 1976 because of its ties with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the PC continued to govern several important cities and regions (e.g. the Red Belt of Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Le Marche) and to exercise considerable influence on national politics. This long lasting opposition between the PC and the DC had consequences in society and particularly on the arts, which were troubled by the struggle between realist and abstract painters – the latter championed by the influential Lucio Fontana. The Milanese art scene of the fifties was still highly affected by the realistic trends officially supported by the PC: the VI Communist Congress of 1947 called for art to be made accessible even to uneducated social classes by the employment of simple figurative forms delivering a socialist content. In short, the party promoted a reactionary, propagandistic art subjected to a political discourse and to a pedagogical intent. Therefore, it could be argued that Nuclear art, as well as that of Manzoni, emerged in reaction to these political precepts.

At the same time, the Venice Biennale – a great showcase of official art *par excellence* – encouraged the prevailing 'post-cubist' style, a tendency championed by artists belonging to the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (The New Front of the Arts), such as Renato Guttuso and Armando Pizzinato. After 1947, both of these artists deliberately aligned themselves to the realist trend. The Venice Biennale played an important role in making international practices popular in Italy, not only by organising retrospectives on historical avant-garde artists, but, most importantly, by exhibiting contemporary trends, for example Jackson Pollock's action painting.²⁰ Pollock had already been shown at Il

²⁰ Five Biennales from 1948 to 1956 were organised by the minister Rodolfo Pallucchini whose cultural intent was to re-evaluate historical avant-garde movements. He succeeded in piecing together a fairly complete picture of the whole European avant-garde scene, from which, however, Dadaism was still excluded. The aim was to bridge the gap between a non-specialised audience and 'new' contemporary art practices. The two main events of 1948 were the first retrospective exhibition of Picasso (his first appearance at the Biennale at the age of 67) presented by Guttuso and the display of Peggy Guggenheim's collection, which included 136 works by 73 artists, presented by Giulio Carlo Argan. By the beginning of the fifties, the historical relevance of European trends was fully acknowledged: Braque (1948), Matisse (1950), Dufy (1952), Ernst and Arp (1954) all had been rewarded by the official jury. The 1950 Biennale achieved considerable success as well by organising four major exhibitions on Fauves, Cubism, Futurism and the *Blaue Reiter*. The Mexican Pavilion that featured works by Jose Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo

Naviglio Gallery in Milan in October 1950, preceded by Wols at Il Milione Gallery in 1949. The importance of Wols' contribution to a 'space-age aesthetics' is acknowledged by Jean-Paul Sartre: '[Wols' paintings] exhibit the fauna of Mars as it might appear to a member of our species, and the human race as it might appear to Martians. Both Man and Martian, Wols applies himself to looking at the earth with inhuman eyes.'²¹ The presence of Pollock and other informal artists had certain relevance for Nuclear artists, influenced by style and techniques. Regarding Manzoni, particular acquaintance with Informal painting can be traced in his very early canvases - that I am going to discuss later - but surely not after 1957-1958.

The Nuclear movement drew its origins from this particular context, that is to say from the rejection of the art of propaganda that still clung to an academic aesthetics and from the adoption of a free gestural abstract style imported from abroad. However, it can be also considered a response to the broader 'nuclear post-war aesthetics', which were at that time reaching a global scale and which were influenced by both international political tensions nourished by the fear of a nuclear disaster and recent scientific discoveries. In his essay 'A Short Story about Censorship', Baj writes: 'In 1951 I inaugurated Nuclear Art, which serves as a warning, delivering titles such as "The explosion comes from the right", "Do not kill the children" and "Nuclearized figures"'. Nuclear Art was surrealist and expressionist as well as an art of protest: a claim of violence and destruction.'²² Nuclear artists maintained an ambiguous stance, neither slavishly embracing the fascination for new scientific discoveries, nor consciously condemning the danger of a possible nuclear catastrophe. However, as testified by the last edition of the nuclear review *Il Gesto* [fig. 1.3], by the end of the fifties the earlier curious and

gained unexpected praise and visibility. In 1952 Pallucchini presented a comparative exhibition, placing Italian Divisionism (Previati Pellizza Volpedo and Segantini) alongside French Pointillism (Pissarro, Signac and Seurat). Also, a major exhibition of prints by Toulouse-Lautrec was set up in the Napoleonic Room. The American pavilion presented the action paintings of Jackson Pollock. The Special Prize for Sculpture was awarded to Alexander Calder in 1952 and to Lynn Chadwick in 1956.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Finger and Non-Fingers*, quoted in Stephen Petersen, *Space-Age Aesthetics*, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 79.

²² Enrico Baj, *Una breve storia di censura*, in *Scritti sull'arte: dal futurismo statico alla merda d'artista* (Bertiolo: AAA edizioni, 1996), my translation.

ambivalent attitude towards science gave way to a stridently cynical one.²³

Interestingly, this shift in tenor was coincident with the beginning of the construction of the first nuclear power plants in central and southern Italy.

Launched by Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, the movement maintained an open and blurred structure to avoid a blind adhesion to a fixed programme. However, it progressively acquired new members while drawing the attention of a wide range of critics. The first show, entitled *Baj e Dangelo: Pittura Nucleare*, was organised at the Gallery San Fedele in Milan between 3 and 16 November 1951. On 10 November, the first public discussion on Nuclear Art took place in the Gallery itself. Well-known critics and artists such as Giorgio Kasserlian, Lucio Fontana, Gianni Dova and Mario Carletti were in attendance. In the following year, the movement became widely renowned both in Italy and abroad: several shows in Brussels and Milan were arranged. This remarkable escalation of events led to new artists joining the group: Joe Cesare Colombo, Enzo Preda, Antonino Tullier (as a literary critic as well as an artist), Leonardo Marioni Travi, Max Rusca and Pino Serpi. During those intense years a fervent production of manifestos and theoretical texts shaped and defined the foundations of the movement. The essays 'Prefigurazione' ('Pre-figuration') by Enrico Brenna and 'Definizione dei nucleari' ('Definition of the Nuclearists') by Beniamino del Fabbro were of particular importance.²⁴ However, despite considerable efforts, sometimes the objectives pursued by these artists as well as their canvases were difficult to digest for a wider audience. The press ironically highlighted the obscure vocabulary of one of the manifestos 'Per una pittura organica' ('Towards an organic painting') [fig. 1.4] that proclaimed: 'Nuclear artists want to organicize disintegration'.²⁵ In an article in the newspaper 'Il Corriere d'Informazione' Leonardo Borgese wrote:

²³ *Il Gesto* was the magazine edited by Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo and published in 4 issues in between 1955 and 1959.

²⁴ Published in the exhibition catalogue *Prefigurazione*, Studio B24, Milan (Baj, Colombo, Dangelo, Marian, Rusca, Serpi), September 1953.

²⁵ *Per una pittura organica*, signed by Piero Manzoni, Mario Colucci, Guido Biasi, Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga. Reproduced in Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull'arte*, ed. Luigi Gaspare Marcone (Milano: Abscondita, 2013). The original manuscript was published in both Italian and French and was distributed by the Nuclear movement in Milan, June 1957.

To organicize? this verb doesn't exist! Maybe those nuclearists intended "to organize" [...] what disintegrated world? So far only a few atoms have been decomposed. And if the world was truly going to be shattered, you [Nuclear painters] could not discover anything at all, as you would be disintegrated as well!! What's the nature of this peculiar inferiority complex of the artists towards the sciences, which begins at the time of Divisionism through Futurism and continues until Spatialism and Nuclearism? This is a rather grotesque competition ...²⁶

Despite the evident mockery, the reviewer unconsciously acknowledges the two main ideas that ground the nuclear doctrine: to 'organicize the destruction' and to inflame a 'race between art and science'. At the same time, the review places the Nuclear Movement as the sequel of two major avant-garde trends: Spatialism, championed by Fontana, and Futurism. The impact of Futurism on Italian postwar artists and the importance it held for the whole decade is due to the link with modernity and modernisation that the movement sought to have: as stressed before, Futurism was the first avant-garde movement in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century promoting the country's progressive modernisation, visible in the establishment of new factories and in the expansion of industrial cities. The participation of Italy in the First World War on the side of the Allies witnessed to its ambition of becoming a world-reknown power and hegemony. Not only Futurism supported this obsessive desire of modernity in society but it also promoted the advent of a new, anti-academic, anti-classicistic style, becoming a groundbreaking movement and a model to imitate for future generation of artists. It's worthy to remind that artists working during the first phase of Futurism (until 1918) had no sort of connection with fascism but bore anarchic ideologies – therefore no legacy of fascist political ideas was reclaimed by Italian artists working during the fifties. In the following section I will discuss further discourses on 'organicization', destruction, and science owing to their importance both for the Nuclear artists and for Manzoni.

²⁶ Polignoto (Leonardo Borgese's pseudonym), "Ancora un manifesto, l'assurda gara tra arte e scienza, dopo il divisionismo, il futurismo, lo spazialismo, il nuclearismo, ecco ora l'ultimo 'ismo' che vuole 'organicizzare la disintegrazione'," *Corriere d'Informazione*, August 14-15, 1957, 3, my translation.

1.1 *Organicize the disintegration (?)*

By ruminating on the images of Japanese cities bombarded in 1945, I believe I might be able to construct a point of view with which to confront world history. It was only from the springboard stance of a return to that point where all human constructs were nullified that future construction would again be possible, I thought. Ruins to me were a source of imagination, and in the 1960s, it turned out that the image of the future city was itself ruins. Professing faith in ruins was equal to planning the future, so much were the times deranged and out of sync.²⁷

In the surprising words of the Japanese architect Isozaki, the images of the bombed cities signified allegorically the death of an old system, as well as new life for the city. For Isozaki, the ruins emblematically constituted a ‘source of imagination [...] crucial in constructing alternate times and spaces to revive fading memories’.²⁸ As a source of inspiration for a imminent reconstruction, the images of nuclear explosions played a pivotal role in the imagery adopted by Nuclear artists. In this section I am going to discuss notions of destruction, reconstruction, and nuclear threat and how they have been investigated by Nuclear artists - not merely attempting to draw a visual parallelism between the explosion of the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the paintings made by Nuclear artists, but also discussing the way these artists portray a notional post-atomic man, a survivor of atomic disaster. Several Japanese photographers contributed to documenting the effect of the explosions, capturing the A-bomb survivors in the 1950s. Among others, Yosuke Yamahata, a Japanese-army photographer, was one of the first to testify to the effects of the carnage.

The devastated landscape of the cities bombed, the fires, and architectural debris like the ones captured by Yamahata, recall the *tabula rasa* that features the ‘sub-atomic’ scenes portrayed by the Nuclear painters. If we look at some of their early works dating from the beginning of the fifties, these Informal canvases characterised by dark colours and thick dense brushstrokes

²⁷ Arata Isozaki, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, Mass.: the MIT Press 2006), pp. 99-100.

²⁸ Yasufumi Nakamori, “Imagining a City through Photography: Japan from 1945 to 1968,” in Okwui Enwezor, Katie Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes, eds, *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2016), 135.

materialise a 'zero of creation'. Only at a later stage does the human figure populate these canvases again, thereby revealing a hidden life beneath the masking surface of matter. Asger Jorn writes of Baj's black paintings:

Against abstraction – that begins with the colour white, pure optimism – he (Baj) tries to start off with black – nothingness, absolute zero – up to where he can, and it seems that he has already reached an advanced stage. In this total darkness, he proceeds to materialise and synthesise a new world, the first glimpse of the presence of a universe of shadows and anxieties that smoulders beneath the ashes, waiting for the flame.²⁹

The notion of 'zero' as appropriated here by Asger Jorn in reference to Baj's work has two sides: firstly it links to both the destruction caused by World War II and to the threat during the period of the Cold War; and secondly to the positive idea of war as 'hygiene of the world' as professed by Marinetti. Baj's *Immaculate Conception* (1951) stages this double-faced rhetoric of purity/destruction, linked by a reciprocal causality: spurts of colour fall over a heavy dark background, grasping at a metaphysical presence that remains concealed by the impenetrability of the matter. Similarly, Baj's *Nuclear Forms* (1951) [fig. 1.5] depicts three dark clouds on a stridently yellow background potentially on the verge of discharging energy. The iconography of this work recalls the mushroom-shaped cloud generated by atomic bombs, an iconography already employed in the first Nuclear Manifesto, which consisted of a concretist poem in which the words are displayed to form a mass of dust and debris caused by an atomic explosion [fig. 1.6]. The scattering of nuclear charges that mimics the slow rebirth of a chaotic world in an atomic era feature in the 1951 collective painting *Nuclear Explosion* by Baj, Sergio Dangelo and Joe Colombo, which is also indebted to Jackson Pollock's style.

²⁹ *Contrario all'astrazione, che comincia col colore bianco – l'ottimismo assoluto –, egli cerca di procedere dal nero, dalla nullità o zero assoluto, fino a dove può, e sembra già essere arrivato a buon punto. In questo buio assoluto egli inizia la concretizzazione e la sintesi di un nuovo mondo, il primo scintillio dell'essere di un universo di ombre e inquietudini che cova sotto le ceneri, in attesa della fiamma.* Asger Jorn, *Enrico Baj*, (Copenhagen: Kunst, 1956), quoted in Enrico Baj and Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Baj: dal generale al particolare* (Milano: Fabbri, 1985): 67, my translation.

The frequent recurrence of the term 'nuclear' – according to Baj, the only efficacious term to address aesthetic and scientific relativism as theorised by Einstein – discloses its importance.³⁰ As Jorn observes:

The denomination “nuclear” means a lot to Baj. To be honest, the first time I heard this label I took it with sceptical irony, but the subsequent development of Baj's Nuclear art forces me to stand by it. And that name progressively becomes more and more clear. It can be rightfully acknowledged as the natural Italian development of Spatial and Futurist art towards a new dimension.³¹

The new dimension mentioned by Asger Jorn in this passage is the response to a nihilistic attitude and it emerges from ‘nothing’. Therefore, the destruction portrayed by Nuclear artists becomes reimagined as the preliminary stage of a subsequent 'organization'.

In 1949 Theodor W. Adorno asserted that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.³² With this claim, Adorno suggested that cultural criticism's collusion with the barbaric happening of the holocaust implies that poetry itself – and by extension the whole realm of 'art' – is likely to slide into reification. Poetry then must recognise itself as cut from the same cloth as the cultural production that made Auschwitz possible. As a consequence, poetry needs to assume a novel critical stance, overcoming metaphysical essences by 'returning to things' whose fragmented status is able to produce new constellations of meanings. Adorno is not advocating any *aporia* or iconoclastic attitude: quite the contrary. How is it then possible to make 'art' in a post-atomic age that is characterised by a sense of imminent doom, of *irrequieta quies*? As a response, Nuclear artists sought a new vocabulary of expression apt to 'organize the disintegration'. The neologism 'organize' comes from both 'organic' and 'organize', which refers to the organic matter that spills randomly on to the

³⁰ See Enrico Baj to Asger Jorn, January 30, 1956, in *Baj-Jorn lettres* (Saint Etienne: Musee de l'Art Moderne, 1989), 159.

³¹ '[...] la denominazione di “nucleare”, alla quale Baj tiene molto. Ammetto che presi questa etichetta con scettica ironia la prima volta che la sentii, ma lo sviluppo dell'arte nucleare di Baj mi obbliga a rispettarla. E questa giusta denominazione diventa sempre più chiara. Si può dire che è. In Italia, lo sviluppo dell'arte futurista e spaziale verso una nuova dimensione [...].’ Asger Jorn, *Enrico Baj*, quoted in Baj and Lemaire, *Baj*, 67, my translation.

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1982), 35.

canvases and shapes subterranean worlds that gradually remerge from a zero state of obliteration.

In 1951 Giorgio Kaiserlian, champion critic of the Nuclear movement, wrote that: 'the matter has more imagination than ourselves'.³³ Influenced by scientific discoveries on the atom, Nuclear artists acknowledged both the autonomy of matter and its biological self-mutation so as to exploit its properties through an alchemical approach. The breakdown of the atom's integrity did not really 'become a metaphor for the crisis in materialism that Kandinsky experienced, spurring his inward turn to abstraction' but rather it developed into the opposite.³⁴ The discovery that the atom does not constitute an indivisible unity paralleled the breakdown of the old world after the war and instigated not only a sense of passive fear that prefigured an uncertain future but also a constructive will made concrete by the possibility of rearranging matter after its decomposition. The atomic catastrophe seemed to provoke a new material order as well as the rise of the notions of monochromes, Conceptual and Kinetic art forms, the ideas of ephemerality and that the spectacle. 'Organicize' can be interpreted as both 'to bring back to life' and also 'to make something organic' that is animated by an autonomous life. In this respect, faith in modern science as enlightened rationalism is signified by the atom as 'a source not only of devastation but also of inspiration', as claimed before.³⁵ For instance, Roberto Crippa's *Spirale* (Spiral, 1951) [fig. 1.7] and Mario Colucci's *Nuclei in movimento* (*Nuclei on the go*, 1963) [fig. 1.8] all sought to depict the atomic nucleus and the frantic spin of its electrons.

1.2 The paradoxical race between Man and Science

The Japanese photographer Ken Domon documented the A-bomb survivors visiting a hospital, an orphanage and several communities in the city of Hiroshima; he collected the shots taken in the series 'Hiroshima', published in

³³ Giorgio Kaiserlian, "La materia ha più immaginazione di noi," in *Arte Nucleare*, (Milano: Amici della Francia, 1952).

³⁴ Stephen Petersen, "Explosive Propositions: Artists React to the Atomic Age," *Science in Context*, 17 (2004): 580.

1957. He was one among others to testify to the conditions of the survivors, displaying the post-atomic man's tragic conditions.

In Nuclear art, the depiction of the atom goes in parallel with the birth of atomic man, stemming from a new relationship with scientific discoveries and their (dreadful) consequences. How can this relationship be thought to explain and justify a novel understanding of man? How is this 'atomic' man represented by Nuclear painters?

Baj's recurring image of the "atomic" man was a crude, graphic, at times whimsical conflation of a mushroom cloud and the skull and vertebrae of an eviscerated figure formed from freely poured enamel paint. On a certain level, these damaged and mutated forms resonate with written accounts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at time when photographs of the bomb casualties were still being censored by the occupying authority and genetic mutations were only gradually being discussed in the international press.³⁶

The ambiguous nature of the atomic Man becomes evident in Nuclear paintings in which imaginary sub-atomic landscapes are colonised by monster-like figures. The 'new forms of Man' mentioned in the Nuclear Manifesto are an actual reference to those 'sub-human' beings – or homunculi – generated by radioactive contamination. But, again, the tone of the text is not of mourning or condemnation but of euphoric celebration, since the atomic bombs are the result of man's perceived advancement in scientific discoveries. How can the 'body-snatchers' depicted by the Nuclear artists legitimise a correspondence between scientific progress and human rationality? The discrepancy here is only apparent. A proto-human being born from the atomic devastation shows the effectiveness of scientific development, which is a product of man himself. These homunculi notionally testify both to the success of science and to the empowerment of man in its progress. Atomic Man has amorphous features that transcend the issues of race and gender; he controls science and possessed

³⁵ Petersen, *Space-Age Aesthetics*, 114.

³⁶ Stephen Petersen, "'Form Disintegrate': Painting in the Shadow of the Bomb," in in Okwui Enwezor, Katie Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes, eds, *Postwar*, 143.

atomic power. Here, the paradox is glaring. Man is at once victim and creator of his own progress.

This helps explain the absurd tension between art and science which characterised the post-war period with regard to art's ambition to represent this ambivalence and its effects, which characterised the post-war period. Since it occupies a less significant position within human consciousness, art aims to reaffirm its power against the progressive vaunting of human rationality. As Gabrielle Decamous puts it:

The overspecialization and regulation of science led to an acceleration that supplanted the arts and the humanities in the task of visualization – and invention – of the atom and the universe. Quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg even suggested that modern physics and its atomic applications had superseded philosophy from antiquity to Kant on the question of the formation of matter.³⁷

Nuclear figuration rethinks contemporary scientific advancements questioning its possible evolution and its negative consequences; at the same time, Nuclear art aims to celebrate the modern Man riding the waves of progress.

2. Piero Manzoni: a 'psychoanalytical nuclear painter'

This section discusses Manzoni's engagement with the Nuclear group and its themes. Manzoni began to be regarded as Nuclear painter when he signed the manifesto 'Per una pittura organica' (1957). This was not the first manifesto Manzoni had signed with the nuclear artists: it was preceded by *Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini* ('Towards the discovery of a zone of images', 1956) and by *L'arte non è vera creazione...* ('Art is not true creation...', 1957).³⁸ However Manzoni's relationship with the Nuclear artists was rather problematic. The artist once labelled himself as a 'psychoanalytical Nuclear painter', thus establishing a link between Jungian theories and Nuclear art. However, there is no proof that such a division – between physical and

³⁷ Gabrielle Decamous, "Nuclear Activities and Modern Catastrophes: Art Faces the Radioactive Waves," *Leonardo* 44 (2011): 125.

psychoanalytical painters, which Manzoni mentioned to the journalist Adele Cambria – ever existed in the Nuclear group.³⁹ Presumably it was Manzoni's invention, not shared by Nuclear theories and which was made up by the artist in order to make himself visible. Manzoni had controversial relationships with exponents of the movement, particularly with Giorgio Kaiserlian and Baj himself. In addition to the major international collective show 'Arte Nucleare 57' [fig. 1.9] mentioned before, Manzoni exhibited with Baj on two significant occasions: 'Fontana, Baj, Manzoni' (1958) and 'l'Avanguardia' (1958) [fig. 1.10]. The latter also featured works by Fontana, Picabia and Sant'Elia, and a text by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was published in the catalogue, deliberately connecting the neo-avant-garde artists of the fifties with Futurism. The friendship between Manzoni and Baj is testified by a correspondence of six letters from Manzoni to Baj (the replies from Baj to Manzoni are missing) and by the collaborative painting *Arrivano gli ultracorpi* ('Here Come the Ultrabodies', 1958) [fig. 1.11] that represents a body-snatcher walking on an *Achromes*.⁴⁰

From 1958 onwards Manzoni progressively detached himself from the Nuclear group, to which he truly never fully belonged. This separation is foreseen in a letter from Manzoni to Baj (1958) where the artist talks about the end of his artistic collaboration with Angelo Verga as a result of him becoming closer to Roberto Crippa's style. The definitive rupture is mentioned in a letter from Guido Biasi to Enrico Baj, in which Biasi quotes Manzoni's criticising Baj for being 'novecentista' (of the twentieth century), reactionary and opportunist. Consequently, Baj excluded Manzoni from the collective

³⁸ Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull'Arte*, 13-15.

³⁹ 'Piero Manzoni begins to explain: Nuclear painters are divided into physical and psychoanalytical painters. I am a psychoanalytical painter.' Adele Cambria, "Vivono nell'avvenire" *Il Giorno*, 18 June 1957; 'Manzoni, the theorist of the group said: "The launch of the Russian satellite could not but excite us ... we knew, already in '51 and then in '52, that the matter has more imagination than men, and that truth belongs to the atom."' Adele Cambria, "Cocktail Nucleare," *Il Giorno*, 12 October 1957, 7.

⁴⁰ Three of these six letters have been published in Francesca Gramegna, "Una grossa e violenta manifestazione contro la critica dell'arte: il carteggio tra Enrico Baj e Piero Manzoni nella Milano degli anni cinquanta," *ARTES* 13 (2005-2007): 1-18. The originals are in the archive of the MART Museum in Rovereto.

exhibition organised together with the *Gruppo 58* at the Minerva Gallery in Naples (1959).

During his Nuclear period, Manzoni produced three series of works – less well known than the *Achromes* – that can be grouped as follow: the *Impronte (Imprints)* [fig. 1.12], *Jungian Paintings* (1955-56) [fig. 1.13] and *Catrami* (Matterist painting, until 1957) [fig. 1.14]. The *Imprints* – works difficult to date as they were never exhibited during Manzoni's lifetime – feature ordinary objects such as pens, nails, keys and buttons, whose shape has been 'impressed' on the canvas, previously treated by the artist with a suspension of tar, or oil and tar, in order to create a heavy dark background. Because of the physical relation between signifier and signified, Elio Grazioli understands the representation of these objects as 'indexical signs'. By contrast, scholar Gregory Tentler offers a different reading of the work, arguing that Manzoni retouches the imprints to create an anthropomorphic resemblance as well as a three-dimensional illusion of depth.⁴¹ Manzoni's inspiration can be traced back to the *Manifesto dell'arte improntale* ('Manifesto of Imprinting Art') released by Remo Bianco in 1956, which affirms: 'an imprint is anything which creates a lasting impression on our subconscious'.⁴² Notably, this series of works engages with issues that affect Manzoni's later output: the focus on materiality, the denial of any sort of individuality through the serial repetition of fixed forms, and the challenge to the celebration of the artist's gestures advocated by Informal painters. In addition, these works point to Manzoni's obsession with the theme of the 'fingerprint', the mark of the artist, displayed in works such as *Uova (Eggs, 1960)* and *Tavole di accertamento (Tables of Assessment, 1962)* [fig. 1.15]. The difference between early works like the *Imprints* and the *Achromes* is only then illusory when considered within this context. This supports the idea that I will discuss later in this chapter when I consider how each series of works retains elements manifested in the previous one.

⁴¹ See Gregory Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs: Piero Manzoni and the Postwar Avant-Garde, 1956-1963," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010) 42-45.

⁴² Quoted in Matthew Gale and Renato Biracco, *Beyond Painting: Burri, Fontana, Manzoni*, (London: Tate publishing, 2005).

While the *Catrami* are affected by the influence of Baj's technique, the so-called *Jungian Paintings* are made according to an attentive reading of the work of Carl Gustav Jung, focusing on the psychoanalyst's ideas of archetype, mythology and collective unconscious. The book *Prolegomena to a Scientific Study of Mythology* was published in translation in Italy for the first time in 1948. However, Jung is not Manzoni's only source of inspiration here. I argue that Manzoni's *Hominides* convey the influence of early avant-garde tropes, particularly the work of James Ensor. In a diary entry Manzoni mentions *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1889) [fig. 1.16], commenting upon its grotesque style and the prototype of the 'mask' and its significance.⁴³ The figures portrayed by Ensor in this painting resemble carnival masks deformed by hypocrisy and alienation, in a similar way to Baj's *Body Snatchers* and Manzoni's martian-like figures. The reference to Ensor signifies a bond with historical avant-garde movements that both Manzoni and the Nuclear artists sought to reclaim, inheriting and moving forward their legacies.

Germano Celant substantiates the link between Manzoni and the Nuclear movement by establishing a parallelism between Manzoni's homunculi and the alien-like prototypes represented by Nuclear artists. According to Celant, Manzoni's Jung-inspired beings can be easily compared to the figures of Gianni Dova, the insects of Cesare Peverelli, the totemic images of Roberto Crippa and the animalistic clots of Emilio Scanavino among others.⁴⁴ In addition to the influence of both Nuclear themes and German avant-garde style, Gregory Tentler has argued for another source of inspiration, considering Manzoni's homunculi in relation to the popular biweekly science-fiction magazine *Urania*, regularly read by the artist. Notably, works like *Abilene* and *L'Invincibile Jean* (both 1957) clearly find echoes in the journal. For example, the latter takes its title from the short story *Fuochi d'Artificio* (*Fireworks*) by Pierre Versins.⁴⁵

⁴³ Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2013) 67.

⁴⁴ Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni, Catalogo Generale* (Milano: Prearo, 1975) 23. See Gregory Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs," 50.

⁴⁵ In Giorgio Monicelli, ed., "Urania", (Milano: Mondadori, 1957). For further discussion of this argument see Gregory Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs", 59-62.

Manzoni's rupture with the group happened at the end of 1957, when the Nuclear artists went back to classical figuration. Following his own path, Manzoni focused on the making of the *Achromes*. According to Manzoni's own understanding of his work, these blank paintings do not seek to represent iconic images or convey symbolic meanings, rather they materialise the permanence of myth through their own concrete presence and their hunt for a universal dimension. Borrowing from Tentler, I would argue that the theoretical shift is also testified by changes in the use of language. While Manzoni had formerly evoked 'an alphabet of primary images', he later wrote: 'And not even stylistic coherency can preoccupy us, because our only preoccupation can be continuous research continuous self-analysis; only with that can we arrive at establishing morphemes "recognizable" to all in the environment of our civilization.'⁴⁶ In linguistics a morpheme is the smallest unit that has a meaning identifiable by a community. As asserted by Tentler, 'the concept appealed to Manzoni because the morpheme was concrete, easily legible by all, and conveyed an essential quality.'⁴⁷ Therefore, the adoption of the term 'morpheme' instead of 'alphabet' symptomatises a change in tenor and in target, shifting towards an 'essentialism' witnessed in later series of works.

2.1 Materiality

[...] [the *Line*'s] value lies not in the degree to which it is more or less beautiful, but the extent to which it is more or less a line: its existence lies in this (just as a mark is worth more or less a mark, and not in the extent to which it is more or less beautiful or evocative, though in this case the value of the surface is still only as a medium). [...] It is not a question of shaping things, nor of articulating messages [...] there is nothing to be said: there is only to be, to live.⁴⁸

– Piero Manzoni

⁴⁶ 'E neppure ci può preoccupare la coerenza stilistica, perché unica nostra preoccupazione può essere solo la continua ricerca, la continua autoanalisi con cui soltanto possiamo arrivare a fondare morfemi «riconoscibili» da tutti nell'ambito della nostra civiltà.' See Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs," 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Libera Dimensione" (Free Dimension), *Azimuth*, 1960, reproduced in Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni*, (London and Milan: Serpentine Gallery and Charta, 1998) 132-134.

In the present section I am going to develop my narrative on zero aesthetics by discussing Manzoni's shift towards a *tabula rasa* of creation, as well as the significance of 'anti-aestheticism'. Both ideas of zero and anti-aesthetics frame my discussion on Manzoni's *Achromes*, providing the reader with the theoretical background that encloses these works.

In an issue of the *Art Journal* dated 2004, a series of papers debating the polarity between 'aesthetics' and 'anti-aesthetic' was published.⁴⁹ This corpus of essays challenges canonical opposition between aesthetics and social practices implied by postmodernism. Arthur Danto's essay 'Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art' investigates the denial of the notion of *kalliphilia* – literally 'the love for beauty' shared by avant-garde movements, acknowledging the possibility of reconciling 'beauty' and 'politics'.⁵⁰ Conversely, in the essay 'Beauty Knows No Pain', Alexander Alberro affirms that aesthetic pleasure and social engagement are radically incompatible.⁵¹

The notion of anti-aesthetics at stake in my thesis has little or nothing to do with the idea of 'beauty' or with the opposition between 'beauty' and 'politics'. 'Anti-aesthetics' in Manzoni's work responds not only to the rejection of any aesthetic value, but also to a constructive inclination. My understanding of 'anti-aesthetics' is closer to the triple definition given by art historian Hal Foster in his essay 'Post-modernism: A Preface'. Hal Foster acknowledges anti-aesthetics not as symptomatic of a modern nihilistic attitude but as the vector that subverts systems of representation as well as the notion of an aesthetic category as a whole. According to Foster, anti-aesthetic qualities are associated with those art practices that deal with cultural forms such as the vernacular rejecting the possibility of 'a privileged aesthetic realm'.⁵²

Understood in these terms, the notion of anti-aesthetics is bound to the idea of 'zero' as related to art practice. I have already explained what I mean

⁴⁹ James Meyer, Toni Ross, "Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic: an introduction," *Art Journal*, 63 (2004): 20-23.

⁵⁰ Arthur C. Danto, "Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 63, (2004): 24-35.

⁵¹ Alexander Alberro, "Beauty Knows No Pain," *Art Journal*, 63, (2004): 36-43.

⁵² Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, Washington, Bay Press, 1983), xii.

by ‘zero’ in the introduction of this thesis. Nonetheless, there are other useful references that can be taken into consideration to better elucidate this concept. Quoted by scholar Nicolas Zurbrugg, French composer Michel Chion gives a useful definition of zero, while considering the relation between ‘zero’ and the internal structure of avant-garde movements. The composer asserts that each trend necessarily lapses into four different stages, of which ‘zero’ is the preliminary one:

The ‘zero’ or elementary, polemical phase when new materials and techniques are tested without any particular purpose in mind; the ‘imitative’ phase, in which new materials and techniques are deployed conservatively in accordance with the convention of established discourses; the ‘purist’ phase in which new materials and techniques are employed strictly on their own terms; and the final ‘hybrid’ phase in which all of these possibilities are consciously and confidently intermingled.⁵³

Borrowing from Chion, Zurbrugg divides the ‘zero phase’ into two additional subcategories: a ‘primitive’ zero stage that refers to pre-technological models and a ‘futurist’ one, that aims to employ new technological constructions.⁵⁴ A ‘zero status’ in Manzoni pertains neither to the ‘primitive’ nor to the ‘futurist’ stage. It can be found in between an ‘abstract lyrical’ phase that comprises Manzoni’s Nuclear works and a subsequent ‘material’ one that I will acknowledge later in this section. Therefore the notion of ‘zero’ as applied to Manzoni’s work coincides with what Chion labels as the ‘purist’ phase.

Following on from these premises I shall therefore analyse the *Achromes* according to more than one perspective, employing different registers. My first assumption discusses these works as emblems of post-modernist dystopias, problematising the adoption of such aesthetic category. Notably, Foster distinguishes between a postmodernism which ‘deconstructs modernism and resists the status quo and a postmodernism that repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a post-modernism of

⁵³ Michel Chion, “Vingt années de music électro-acoustique, ou une quête d’identité,” *Musique an jeu*, 8 (1972) 19-28, quoted in Nicholas Zurbrugg, “‘Métaphore Manquée’, and the Myth of the Trans-Avant-garde, SubStance,” 14, (1986) 69.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 70.

reaction’.⁵⁵ In the case of Manzoni, we can talk about a ‘postmodernism of resistance’. Nonetheless, this label is also quite limited as Manzoni does not adopt a deconstructive stance in his practice. However, criticising the informal technique that had patronised the artistic scene in the fifties, Manzoni’s white paintings – the ‘astonished surfaces of pure white’ to quote Agnetti – do not convey any superimposed value or meaning and therefore they assume a post-modernist standpoint according to Foster’s definition of this idea.⁵⁶

Indeed, the difference between Manzoni’s monochromes and modernist abstraction – which makes these works step into the frame of postmodernism – lies in the lack of an absolute purity that conveys unequivocal meanings. Indeed, while ‘for Mondrian, abstract painting was not primarily a goal in itself but rather a method for making a universal absolute truth material and thus perceivable’, for Manzoni the creation of abstract paintings fulfils the opposite objective.⁵⁷ What before was only a medium, the canvas, all at once becomes in Manzoni’s conception both the subject and object of the work. If we consider public participation as one of the fundamental characteristics of postmodern art, the inclusion of the *Achromes* in this category is rather problematic, witnessing the paradoxical nature of these works.⁵⁸

As stressed before, the *Achromes* symbolise a new constructive aesthetics: the *tabula rasa* delivered by these works does not address a cynical perspective, but rather a creative one, similarly to that of the Nuclear artists. Nuclear artists represented a ‘zero’ state by painting catastrophic scenarios and fantastic landscapes populated by de-humanised creatures. The association between a ‘zero’ status and these pictures was thus the result of a metaphorical intellectual procedure preliminary to the re-configuration of human presence. Manzoni works along the same lines, but makes visible the post-war devastation that is only suggested by Nuclear canvases: the *Achromes* dismiss representation, conveying the void and displaying destruction and its effects by

⁵⁵ Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), xii.

⁵⁶ Vincenzo Agnetti, “Intorno alla” in Vanni Scheiwiller, ed. *Piero Manzoni* (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1967), my translation.

⁵⁷ Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 42.

acquiring a certain resemblance with the surface of the wall (the wall, raw in its appearance, metaphorically symbolises emptiness) and therefore destroying the notion of picture plane as well.

What I term constructive aesthetics bears on the notion of the ‘constructive’ as pinned down by Martins in the book already mentioned – and therefore draws upon Mondrian’s legacy. Notably, discussing postwar art practices, Mari Carmen Ramírez insists on a similar concept; she writes: ‘the ideas of precision, purity and even an undeniable minimalism at play here were indicative of the urge to start anew by “constructing” the construction at stake: modern societies capable of erasing in a stroke the chaos generated by the six-year devastation’.⁵⁹ Emphasising the return to purity and minimalism, Ramírez stresses a constructive desire that emerge from both Latin American developmentalism and the recovery that some European regions sought to achieve.⁶⁰ A constructive aesthetics manifests itself in the wide range of *Achromes* that Manzoni created during his lifetime, to the point that defining these works as mere white monochromes is not just reductive but misleading. Manzoni’s *Achromes* can be divided into series according to differences in their shape and material. The narrative that substantiates these works in time is the established link with ‘zero’. After a ‘purist’ initial phase that confers to these canvases a monastic appearance [fig. 1.17], between 1957 and 1962 Manzoni adds on to these canvases a great variety of materials, from combinations of plaster and kaolin in the late fifties to synthetic fibres, wool and fur that make the surface of the ‘painting’ extremely tactile [fig. 1.18]. Between 1957-1958 the canvas is stitched in squares, mimicking the grid [fig. 1.19]:

Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that artist after artist has taken up the grid as the medium within which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it,

⁵⁸ Other bodies of works engage with the public but still maintaining the audience’s supposed emancipation problematic. Chapter 4 will expand on this issue.

⁵⁹ Mari Carmen Ramírez, “The necessity of concreteness: a view from the (global?) south,” in Okwui Enwezor et al., eds., *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-65* (Munich and London: Haus der Kunst and Prestel, 2016), 491.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

as though the origin he had found by peeling back layer after layer of representation to come at last to this schematized reduction, the graph-paper ground, were his origin, and his finding it an act of originality.⁶¹

In her essay 'We Want to Organicize Disintegration', scholar Jaleh Mansoor examines Manzoni's relationship with the grid – defined by Rosalind Krauss as the modernist system par excellence. Mansoor discusses Manzoni's corporeality within a modernist language, enhancing the tension between the template of the grid and the revival of 'materiality', usually banned from modernist discourses. According to the scholar: 'Manzoni initiates the analytical rigour of modernist painting [...] alongside the insistence of a radical – and silent – corporeality.'⁶²

A similar interest in the materiality of the object – a corporeality that appeals to the senses – permeates Oiticica's production as well, particularly in two of his series of works: the *Penetráveis* (Penetrables, from 1961), structures made to be lived in that together constitute the bigger installations of *Tropicália* (1967) and *Éden* (1969); and the *Bólides* (from 1963) that appeal to the 'tactile gaze' of the audience. What I define as the tactile gaze of the audience – something that stimulates the audience's touch by impacting on the eye through its corporeal appearance – plays an important role in both Neo-Concretism, which considers the artist's object as a 'quasi-corpus', and Manzoni's *Achromes* made with both cotton and synthetic fibres.

In order to stress the ambiguous relation between corporeality, structure and surface affecting Manzoni's *Achromes*, Mansoor takes into consideration the *Achrome with Breadrolls* [fig. 1.20], where the 'rosettes' (a typical Italian, low-cost, popular bread) cast in kaolin both fulfil and exceed the grid's self-closure at the same time. Despite the coherency and strength of Mansoor's argument, several gaps can be detected in her discourse. Firstly, this is because the only Manzoni work she actually analyses to prove her argument is the *Achromes with Breadrolls*, a rather particular case in Manzoni's production. As a matter of fact, this work has its sources in the provocative show renamed

⁶¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) 58.

Bread Exhibition, staged on 18 March 1961 by the Italian collective *Gruppo N* and that displayed bread rolls made by the imaginary baker Giovanni Zorzon.⁶³ This was not the first attempt to connect Happenings and edible art: already in 1960 Manzoni performed *Consumption of Art by the Art-Devouring Public* [fig. 1.21], making a fictional audience eat boiled eggs marked with his thumbprint. Fascinated by N's appropriation of this quotidian material, Manzoni made the *Achromes with Breadrolls* some time after the *Gruppo N*'s performance. The bread rolls therefore merged the aesthetic with the socio-political dimension – *Gruppo N* was working closely with the 'sinistra operaista', the left wing working class – while at the same time responding to a playful mockery.⁶⁴ Mansoor neglects these political inferences in her essay. Moreover, while discussing 'materiality' and 'corporeality', Mansoor does not mention Manzoni's 'sculptural' works – such as those *Achromes* made with straw, kaolin and burnt wood with a parallelepiped-like shape [fig. 1.22] – that reject the medium specificity of the work, the ultimate modernist assumption. Indeed, through the bread rolls she exemplifies the subtle tension between the notions of 'surface' and 'body', pointing out how the latter exceeds the former, but she neglects to explain the terms in which Manzoni problematises the label of 'postmodern artist', and how his works plays more on a rhetoric of 'zero' as constructive *tabula rasa*.

Adopted in several of these works, the grid signifies the link between zero and infinity by allowing the serial representation of a shaped module. Manzoni often treats the surface of the grid with kaolin, a material used in the making of porcelain. The kaolin erases colours, giving the canvas a neutral appearance, and moreover creates folds across the surface. By taking an opposite direction, Manzoni brings into question Fontana's spatial concept of the canvas as a 'permeable membrane' that blurs the boundaries between the

⁶² Jaleh Mansoor, "Piero Manzoni: 'We want to organicize disintegration'," *October* 95 (2001): 43.

⁶³ The original name of the exhibition was 'Mostra del pane. Contro il culto della personalità e contro il mito della creazione artistica' ('Bread exhibition. Against the cult of personality and the myth of artistic creation').

⁶⁴ Jacopo Galimberti, "The N Group and the *Operaisti*: Art and Class struggle in the Economic boom," *Grey Room* 49 (2012): 84.

inside and the outside: instead of breaking its surface, he wraps it on itself.⁶⁵

With regard to the use of unprocessed materials, Manzoni pays homage to the sacks and velvets made by Alberto Burri [fig. 1.22].⁶⁶ However he takes a step further by first closing the surface of the canvas to every gestural intervention and then reopening it to welcome the inclusion of new materials. Manzoni's constructive aesthetics come into play when the radical act of freeing the surface is followed by a novel experimental phase. The 'zero' as the stage preliminary to the 'material' but following the 'lyrical' responds to the ambition of going 'against the style' and can be explained in terms of a 'new artistic conception'.⁶⁷ Manzoni therefore moves towards a constructive aesthetics, chasing a zone of autonomy and self-determination.

As I have already pointed out, the different series of the *Achromes* exploit a wide spectrum of materials, conferring to the canvas a 'tactile' quality. If we look at a photograph taken during the exhibition *Nul 62*, two girls are standing very close to a large white *Achrome* made of synthetic cotton. This work was made by adding on to the canvas pieces of a soft white material like cotton, which appeal to the 'tactile gaze' of the audience in a way similar to Oiticica's *Bólides*.⁶⁸ The adoption of woolly elements materialises the shift from an existential dimension – the 'zero' stage substantiated by the ambivalent idea of 'purifying' the canvas – to a sensorial one. These tactile works act on the viewer phenomenologically, raising the possibility of an encounter with the object: the cotton fibres appear to stick out of the

⁶⁵ On the permeable membrane see Guy Brett, 'Life Strategies: overview and selection, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, London, Santiago de Chile, 1960-1980,' in Paul Schimmel and Kristine Style, eds., *Out of Actions, Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

⁶⁶ Burri used to glue damaged burlap sacks on to black or red coloured canvases, conferring to these works a 'poor' appearance.

⁶⁷ "Contro lo Stile/Contre le style/The End of Style," Milan, 1957. Signed by Armand, Enrico Baj, Bemporad, Gianni Bertini, Jacques Calonne, Stanley Chapmans, Mario Colucci, Dangelo, Enrico de Miceli, Reinhout D'Haese, Wout Hoeboer, Hundertwasser, Yves Klein, Théodore Koenig, Piero Manzoni, Nando, Joseph Noiret, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Gio Pomodoro, Pierre Restany, Saura, Ettore Sordini, Serge Vandercam and Angelo Verga, republished in *Leonardo*, 3 (1970) 465-466. *La Nuova Concezione Artistica*, manifesto signed by Alberto Biasi, Enrico Castellani, Heinz Mack, Piero Manzoni, Manfredo Massironi, released on the occasion of the collective exhibition at the *Circolo del Pozzetto*, Padua, 9 April 1960; Udo Kultermann published *Una nuova concezione di pittura* (A new conception of painting) in the second issue of *Azimuth*, January 1960; 'A new artistic conception' was also the title of Manzoni's and Castellani's exhibition at the New Vision Centre, London, 1-19 March, 1960.

background towards the viewer and the surrounding space, disturbing the modernist two-dimensional plane. However, the involvement of the spectator never achieves an empirical experience, as the softness conveyed by these works pertains to the sphere of the institutionalised ‘non-touchable’ artefact. Even sculptural *Achromes* made with both natural and synthetic materials never exceed the limits imposed by a tautological and self-referential discourse of the institution. Therefore, I argue that by combining a palpable surface with an organic autonomy, and therefore creating tangible surfaces, Manzoni on the one hand dismisses the link between purity and abstraction and the notion of medium specificity – both champion principles of modernist art as sustained by Greenberg.⁶⁹ However, never fully acknowledging the participation of the spectator and privileging a tautological standpoint, the artist still retains elements belonging to modernist narratives, therefore problematising the label as post-modern painter.

In creating a relationship between tactile elements and achromatic *tabula rasa*, the artist breaks the boundaries of perception, driven by a scientific fascination for the materiality of nuclear memory. Manzoni’s interest in science can be seen not only in the already-mentioned Jungian paintings, influenced by the popular science-fiction magazine *Urania* that Manzoni used to read, but also in the frequent employment of synthetic fibres and chemical substances, echoing alchemic experiments.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the notion of the ‘organic’ plays an important role in Manzoni’s aesthetics: in a letter to Baj, Manzoni defines the meaning of ‘organicity’ (from the Nuclear movement’s neologism ‘organize’) as opposed to abstraction. Since an organic sign is universal, collective and material, an ‘organicistic’ conception is, according to Manzoni, what permits the continuous mutation of the archetype and a permanent stylistic revolution.

⁶⁸ *Ekpositie nul*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 9-26 March, 1962.

⁶⁹ Besides Greenberg who establishes the link between purity and abstraction in regards to U.S. postwar practices also Mark A. Cheetham in *The Rhetoric of Purity* defines a similar connection.

⁷⁰ ‘In ’60 I made some in cotton wool and expanded polystyrene. I experimented with phosphorescent pigment and with other surfaces soaked in cobalt chloride that would change colour with the passing of time.’ Piero Manzoni, “Some Realisation, Some Experiments, Some Projects,” reproduced in Celant, *Piero Manzoni*, 220.

Because of their organic features Manzoni's plastic *Achromes* respond to the same critical attitude. The way these canvases engage with materiality – by adopting a great variety of materials and forms that make the label 'monochromes' impossible to adopt – reaches exaggerated proportions to the point that, according to Matthew Gale, they might be regarded as the debunking of Fontana's and Burri's artistic attainments. Some early *Achromes* are made using the 'raster', i.e. stitching parts of different canvases together.⁷¹ The adoption of this process metaphorically symbolises the closure of Fontana's cuts and holes. Also, the autonomy dispensed to the canvas sunk in kaolin and glued rebukes Burri's *Combustioni* (*Combustions*), where fire is the principle agent of the creative process and the canvas is left at its mercy. Despite the influence of Fontana and Burri in Manzoni's work is fairly evident and certainly important, I do not think it should be reckoned as the main focus of these works: surely the *Achromes* build upon this legacy, but I argue that the international resurgence of the monochrome and the will to overcome the style of the *Informel*, dominant in Europe in the fifties, both play a greater role in the emergence of these work.

Moreover Manzoni's 'objectification' of the canvas is explained by Gale according to the legacy left by Duchamp's ready-mades. In this respect, the art historian argues that: 'In the combination of provocation and ironic distance, Manzoni may be regarded as one of the most significant critics of materiality. Even the *Achromes*, however indebted to the example of Fontana and Burri, may be considered as a comment upon their achievements.'⁷² To my knowledge, while the mockery is plausible, the overrated parallelism with Duchamp puts these works in danger of a reductive understanding of the practice itself.

⁷¹ 'Raster' is a German word used in the field of typography to indicate the typographer's screen or to describe the lines and bars of colour on a television screen. See Matthew Gale and Renato Miracco, *Beyond Painting*.

⁷² Gale and Miracco, *Beyond Painting*, 109.

2.2 Series

In the previous section I have discussed the relation between materiality and *tabula rasa* in the *Achromes*, claiming how this peculiar combination challenges the adoption of either modernist or post-modern narratives to describe these works. Reflecting upon the *Achromes* as a series within Manzoni's work in series, this section analyses scholar Briony Fer's chapter *Series*, included in the book *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art After Modernism*. While successfully recognising Manzoni's work in 'series' – in line with the artist's definition of the *Achromes* as a 'movement' – Fer makes a few questionable statements. Fer considers the end of the fifties as a critical turning point marked by the shift from a 'collage aesthetics' to a 'serial one'. Borrowing from Mel Bochner's essay 'The Serial Attitude', she explains seriality 'as a method of working in series', affirming that 'seriality and subjectivity are inextricably bound'.⁷³ What kind of subjectivity is Fer referring to? Concerning Manzoni's *Achromes*, the notion of subjectivity does not seem quite appropriate to define both the artist's method of production and the meaning conveyed by his works. Rather, I argue that Manzoni's work in progress follows a scientific evolution in the process of objectification; it also denies a subjective dimension by rejecting the encounter with the audience and thus hiding the artist's intimacy. Moreover Fer argues that what remains constant in the *Achromes* series is the colour white, "which Fontana called 'his obsessional white'".⁷⁴

All series are retrospective: the series emerges only once an original has been not just superseded, but suppressed. [...] There are various strands linking the series 'Achrome' together. First, the list of dates, the sequence of numbers, which binds the work to a skeletal chronology of years. Second, the generic strand of the achrome that links together a very diverse range of materials [...] wildly different in terms of look, feel and touch, they are conjoined in a uniform whiteness. And third, there is the insistence of 'me' of Manzoni who performs each gesture [...] but

⁷³ Mel Bochner, "The Serial Attitude," *Artforum* 6 (1967): 28-33.

⁷⁴ Lucio Fontana, February 1963, quoted in Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line, re-making art after modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 29.

who also irons out the utter inconsistency by situating himself as its centre.⁷⁵

Building on Fer's important and insightful argument, I would like to argue that the emerging of a series does not necessarily call for the suppression of the original: as I am going to explain later in this thesis, Manzoni's work often combines the presence of an original with the reproduction of such in series – the happening of this paradox is evident in works such as the *Artist's Shit* and the *Artist's Breath*. Moreover, subsequent series never destroy the preceding ones; rather they inter-weave with them harmoniously in a way in which each series retains elements of the previous one. The rupture between the various series is deceptive with regard to the sense of unity shared by Manzoni's artistic production.

This dialectical movement responds to the Hegelian notion of 'Aufhebung', according to which each concept develops from the 'sublation' of the previous one. The existence of different but interlinked series is suggested also by art historian Flaminio Gualdoni who establishes a link not only between different *Achromes*, but also between different groups of works, from Nuclear paintings to the *Lines*. Thus, it is important to clarify that when we talk about the 'Achrome series' we are discussing a 'sub-series' among other series, or rather a series within a series, to the point where the series of the *Achromes* can be acknowledged as a 'meta-series'. Moreover, because Manzoni's mode of production undertakes a dialectic movement of recurring elements, I question Fer's initial distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* even. Fer herself seems to deny the importance of establishing a chronological order to which she initially binds Manzoni's work: 'The umbrella term 'achrome' confers, in practice, a number of different series working synchronically; where one series at moments intersects with another, diverges from it, meets again and so on. They are not series in the sense of fitting a prescribed order, where one must be seen before another.'⁷⁶ Moreover Fer suggests that the

⁷⁵ Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 29-31.

⁷⁶ Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 34

Achromes are ‘conjoined in a uniform whiteness’.⁷⁷ This is contradicted by the presence of non-white *Achromes*, namely those made with coloured synthetic fibres able to change according to atmospheric condition [fig. 1.24]. Lastly, the scholar argues about the insistence of ‘me’ of Manzoni that deliberately enhances the authorship of the artist. On this matter I suggest that by emphasising his authorship up to the point of ridicule, Manzoni actually aims to criticise the sovereignty of the artist; that is by both satirically merchandising his or her organic traces and making a parody of the notion of the art object. This attitude is evident across Manzoni’s production but – contrary to what Fer claims – not in the making of the *Achromes* that search for a neutral appearance by masking the artist’s intervention.

I would argue that these works are not linked by the supposedly common ‘whiteness’ discussed by Fer but by sharing a self-referential attitude, away from any mockery. Moreover, Fer’s interpretation of Manzoni as a ‘persona’ detached from the political, social and historical context in which he lived and worked does not fit with what I have argued in the introduction of this chapter. She writes: ‘There is a comic edge to the way Manzoni’s series work, as if things appear out of thin air, as if, with the touch of the magician, hey presto! Rabbits could come out hats’.⁷⁸ Even if Fer in this passage refers to the operation of the series, she seems to imply Manzoni acts as the ‘magician’ who allows this to happen. Therefore, by focusing mainly on the artist’s attitude and on the formal analysis of his works and dismissing any historical research, Fer fails to unfold the ultimate aim of Manzoni’s practice: to blur the boundaries between the audience, the work and its author and to assume an anarchic and groundbreaking position in respect to the contemporaneous artistic context. Fer’s chapter will be discussed further in following sections together with other themes and references that shape Manzoni’s *Achromes*.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 29.

2.3 White

And ‘white’ appears. Absolute white. White beyond all whiteness. White of the coming of white. White without compromise, through exclusion, through total eradication of non-white. Insane, enraged white, screaming with whiteness. Fanatical, furious, riddling the victim. Horrible electric white, implacable, murderous. White in burst of white. God of ‘white’. No, not a god, a howler monkey. End of white.⁷⁹

Both Manzoni and Oiticica are indebted to Malevich’s monochromes. As I will investigate in the next chapter, Oiticica translates Malevich’s radical act of painting ‘white on white’ into a Brazilian reality.⁸⁰ In relation to Malevich, Manzoni holds a less intense but just as ambiguous obligation. In a pair of writings – where the first is the draft of the latter – Manzoni discusses ‘whiteness’, indirectly mentioning Malevich and qualifying his relationship to colour as different from that of the Russian painter:

So, we do not paint; we do not paint blue on blue, or yellow on yellow or white on white: possibly we paint white (but never white on white) or rather we give a full white surface, total [sic] erasing any superfluous phenomenon, any intervention irrelevant to the light of the surface, every phenomenon of memory.⁸¹

In this text, the word ‘white’ is repeated continuously, and almost bears witness to the obsession mentioned by Fontana. However, at a later stage, Manzoni slightly disentangles the focus on whiteness:

It is not a question of ‘painting’ blue on blue or white on white (either in the sense of composition or self-expression). It’s exactly the opposite: the

⁷⁹ Henri Michaux, “With Mescaline, in *Darkness Moves: an Henri Michaux Anthology 1927-1984*,” quoted in David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000) 19.

⁸⁰ On the relation between Oiticica and ‘white’ and the importance of Malevich, Gonzalo Aguilar affirms: ‘the presence of white is not exclusive of the work of Oiticica and in the sixties the centrality of the figure of Malevich becomes important with the work ‘White on White’ that belongs to MoMA’. Furthermore, he suggests that Oiticica’s use of white can be paralleled to Haroldo de Campos’ and concretist poets’: ‘in art Malevich, in poetry Mallarmé utilise white as space of the poem and materialisation of the sign, instituting a horizon of constellar writing in which several poetics could move.’ Gonzalo Aguilar, *Hélio Oiticica: a asa branca do êxtase* (Rio de Janeiro: editor Rocco, 2016) 131, 133-134, my translation.

⁸¹ Piero Manzoni, *The One Dimension*, 1959-1960, Reproduced in Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull’arte*, 77. This text was never published during the artist’s lifetime.

question as far as I am concerned is that of rendering a surface completely white (integrally colourless and neutral) far beyond any pictorial phenomenon or any intervention extraneous to the value of surface. [...] Just a white surface that is simply a white surface and nothing else (a colourless surface that is just a colourless surface).⁸²

Manzoni understands whiteness as achromatic, neutral, colourless, zero, and as shifting the attention of the viewer from the value of colour to the value of 'being'. The 'being' of a work is nothing but its surface that functions as both material support of the painting and subject of the work. Manzoni overlooks the meaning of colour and gesture to focus on the material device only: 'a surface that simply is: to be'.⁸³ He therefore achieves his desired nothingness across time, an evolution that can be examined through the analysis of the language employed. The genesis of the work differs from the origin of the terminology – even if the terminology often functions as the exegesis of the work itself.

Art historian Jacopo Galimberti has rightfully pointed out that Manzoni's white paintings are influenced by the work of Fautrier, exhibited in Milan at the Gallery Le Noci in February 1958. Nonetheless, Manzoni had already made the first monochromatic works in late 1957. But, contrary to what Briony Fer affirms, the term 'achrome' appeared later, on the occasion of the exhibition at the bar *La parete*, Milan, in May 1959, which witnessed Manzoni's careful thinking around this idea.⁸⁴ I agree with Galimberti's hypotheses according to which Manzoni's choice of the word 'achrome' has nothing to do with Klein but can be explained in light of the worldwide resurgence of the monochrome, as testified by the important exhibition *Monochrome Malerei* (Leverkusen,

⁸² Piero Manzoni, *Free Dimension*, in Celant, *Piero Manzoni*, 132

⁸³ Piero Manzoni, *Free Dimension*, 132.

⁸⁴ The art historian again makes a double mistake: to consider the genesis of the term as contemporary to the origin of the work and to set the creation of the *Achromes* as a critical response to Yves Klein: 'Manzoni coined the term 'achrome' in 1957 in order to distinguish it from the monochrome. In particular, in typical rivalrous vein, Manzoni wanted to eclipse Yves Klein whose blue paintings had been exhibited in Milan in January of that year,' in Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 27. Truly, the rivalry between Manzoni and Klein is mostly a mythology staged by critics Germano Celant and Pierre Restany as extensively demonstrated by Jacopo Galimberti, "Klein/Manzoni Conflictualité, collaboration, amitié? La relation personnelle et artistique entre Yves Klein et Piero Manzoni," (MA diss., Université Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2008).

On the invitation to the vernissage of the exhibition at *La Parete*, Manzoni's work is described as 'achrome surface'.

1960, curated by Udo Kultermann, and featuring works by Klein, Manzoni, Fontana, and many other artists). For sure Klein had certain significance in Manzoni's conceptualisation of the *Achromes*, but his influence wasn't more important of that of other contemporaneous artists working on similar issues. It's likely that the term 'achrome' originated from the attempt 'to distance itself from what was set to become a new but dubious pictorial trend. The alpha privative of *Achrome* indicated a progression from or a conceptual clarification of the monochrome.'⁸⁵

In contrast to what I have claimed in so far, Fer sets Manzoni's work in line with Malevich's Suprematism. She attributes to Manzoni a desire to reiterate the Russian painter's earlier rhetoric while still denying his historical role. The importance of Malevich for post-war artists both in Europe and overseas is undeniable. As Fer affirms:

All the upstaging could not conceal the fact that the neo-avant-garde was haunted by Malevich's grand utopian gesture more than any previous generation. Malevich had grandly claimed that 'The blue colour of the sky has been defeated by the Suprematist system, has been broken through, and entered white as the true real conception of infinity', and beckoned 'Sail forth! The White, chasm, infinity is before us'. This is the rhetoric that appeals/appealed to Manzoni.⁸⁶

I would argue that if there is a narrative in Malevich's abstraction that appeals to Manzoni, this is certainly the will to overcome the modernist rhetoric shared by avant-garde monochrome painting to construct something different. The term 'achrome' – and not 'monochrome' – witnesses the distance Manzoni sought to establish from Malevich and fellow artists.

Another hypothesis on the origin of the name that explains further my understanding of the *Achromes* comes from the manifesto 'Essentialisme' by Jef Verheyen that testifies the recurrence of the terminology. The manifesto

⁸⁵ '[...] un tentativo di smarcarsi da ciò che si avviava a diventare una nuova quanto improbabile tendenza pittorica. L'alfa privativo di "acromo" indicava un superamento o una precisazione concettuale della monocromia.' In Jacopo Galimberti, "Yves Klein e Piero Manzoni. Genealogia di un mito," *L'Uomo Nero* 11 (2015): 247, my translation.

⁸⁶ Kasimir Malevič, *Non-objective, creation and Suprematism*, 1919, quoted in Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 28.

was written in 1958 but published on the review *Art Actuelle Internationale* in 1959. At that time Jef Verheyen had friendly contact with Milan-based artists and also later with the founders of the German Zero group. It is therefore possible that Manzoni had access to the text even before its publication. However, Verheyen's approach to the monochrome reads as more idealistic than that of Manzoni, as it perpetuates the use of 'white' as a quest towards visual purity.⁸⁷

Scholar Emiliano Dante acknowledges Manzoni's *Achromes* as conceptually attempting a *tabula rasa* effect to the point where every positive value is abandoned, including colour. The art historian claims further that the white colour alludes to the idea of absolute neutrality. The total lack of colour can be suggested but never achieved. Therefore, according to Dante, the will to accomplish a *tabula rasa* fails from the very beginning. Regarding his own work, Manzoni claims to refuse to appeal to or to convey any symbol, meaning or value. Nonetheless, Dante suggests the artist creates a symbolic metaphor to convey the idea of zero as neutrality: 'white' loses its value to symbolise the non-colour.⁸⁸ Dante's assumptions need to be questioned. Firstly, I argue that the *tabula rasa* is achieved not exclusively by erasing the surface but also through the process of self-enclosure that features in these works. Secondly, if the *Achromes* – as Dante claims – establish an indexical relationship with the 'wall', then these works must be interpreted not as symbols but as 'iconic signs' because they mimic the appearance of a blank wall. Whiteness is indeed dismissed by Manzoni from both perspectives: from the point of view of the material used as the colour white is never used as pure but always mixed with kaolin or chalk and from the perspective of the language adopted, witnessed by the multiple references implied by the word 'achrome' itself.

⁸⁷ See Francesca Pola, *Una visione internazionale: Piero Manzoni e Albisola* (Milano: Electa, 2013) 73.

⁸⁸ Emiliano Dante, *Merda D'Artista* (Roma: Aracne, 2005).

3. Conclusion: Freedom in the Cold War

One of the Italian avant-garde artists' main concerns was to detach themselves and their art from a mimetic and illusory intent and 'to remove from the painting the suggestion of any deceiving space'.⁸⁹ This statement suggests that when to allude to or to represent the third dimension is no longer an acceptable choice, the painting seeks to colonise the surrounding space; detaching itself from the wall, it assumes the features of a three-dimensional object. Because of their object-like qualities, I argue that the *Achromes* possess 'supra-sensorial' properties that attempt to transcend the rational and geometrical limitations traditionally attributed to works of art.

The artistic object as a 'quasi-corpus' investigated through the senses was theorised for the first time at the end of the fifties by Neo-Concrete Brazilian artists. Because of the ability to expand in space and time and to appeal to the tactile gaze of the audience, the understating of the work of art almost as 'tactile object' can be used to scrutinise Manzoni's blank canvases as well. However, the label of 'trans-object' is more apt to describe these works stuck in the middle of a process of 'objectification'. Only some of the *Achromes*, such as the parallelepiped straw or the fur ball complete this process by freeing themselves from the wall: not confined to the support of the canvas, they aim for a free dimension [fig. 1.25].⁹⁰

Freedom can be seen as the ultimate goal of Manzoni's work, but not the only one. I will discuss the notion of freedom and the role it plays in Manzoni's practice in the last chapter of this thesis. In the present chapter, I have scrutinised the properties of the *Achromes* by discussing three strands: the relation between *Achromes* and materiality, the idea of the *Achromes* as a series within a series and lastly the relation between the *Achromes* and the colour white. What I have demonstrated in the present chapter is the importance of both Manzoni's constructive aesthetics that makes the 'zeroness' delivered by his achromatic canvases the starting point for further speculations,

⁸⁹ Flaminio Gualdoni, *Piero Manzoni: vita d'artista*, (Milano: Johan & Levi, 2013) 89.

and his focus on science - evident in the attention to both the organicity of the canvas that I have discussed at length and to natural and synthetic materials - that he inherits from the Nuclear movement. The interest in science is further witnessed by some unrealised projects such as the *Placentarium* [fig. 1.26] and the 'electronically controlled labyrinth for psychological tests and brainwashing' and also by the employment of fiberglass and cobalt chloride in the *Achromes*.⁹¹

I argue that Manzoni's constructive aesthetics is theoretically analogous to Oiticica's anti-artistic 'zero' condition, although the latter is firmly grounded in the Brazilian socio-political reality and therefore retains an activist quality. Manzoni's idea of artistic freedom holds political implications as well. As he states:

To allude, express, represent, abstract, are now non-existent problems. Shape, colour, dimension, do not make sense: the only concern for the artist is to gain the most complete freedom: barriers are a challenge, the physical ones for the scientist and the mental ones for the artist.⁹²

To be fully understood, Manzoni's notion of 'freedom' needs to be detached from an aesthetic dimension and placed in a broader context. Too often Manzoni's practice has been deprived of any political concerns. Following on from Manzoni's text, Renato Miracco writes:

⁹⁰ *Achrome*, 1961, Straw, kaolin, burnt wood, 105 x 58.2 x 58.2cm; *Achrome*, 1961, rabbit skin, burnt wood, 105 x 50 x 50cm.

⁹¹ The description of the *Placentarium* along with a sketch was firstly drafted in 1960 but published only a year later in both Italian and German in the magazine 'ZERO', n.3, Düsseldorf, July 1961. This project is more extensively described in text that was recently published (Gaspere Marcone, 2013, 83-85; Francesca Pola 2013, 120-122) but never released during the artist's lifetime. Manzoni describes the *Placentarium* as follows: '[...] I made an architectural proposal of a pneumatically pulsating ceiling and wall. As another scheme for a park I thought of a cluster of pneumatic cylinders, elongated in shape, like stele, which would vibrate in the blowing of the wind [...]. In '59-'60 I studied the idea of a moving, autonomous sculpture for outdoors. This mechanical animal would be independent because it would draw its nourishment from nature (solar energy). At night it would shut down and close in on itself. In the day it would have moved and emit sounds, rays and antennae in order to seek energy and avoid obstacles. It would also have the ability to reproduce itself.' Piero Manzoni, *Some Realisations, Some Experiments, Some Projects*, in Celant, *Piero Manzoni*, 223.

⁹² 'Alludere, esprimere, rappresentare, astrarre, sono oggi problemi inesistenti. Forma, colore, dimensione, non hanno senso vi è solo per l'artista il problema di conquistare la più integrale libertà: le barriere sono una sfida, le fisiche per lo scienziato, come le mentali per l'artista, Piero Manzoni, *Il Verificarsi di Nuove Condizioni* [Dada Maino], 1961, in Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull'arte*, 45, my translation.

Art at the time – a post-war and Cold War era – was circumscribed by a rhetoric of liberty. Individual freedom, the point of Existential debate, became the point of ideological contention with the Communist East, so that political support (overt or covert) was a significant element in cultural development in the capitalist West.⁹³

Manzoni's political beliefs are controversial, as he never aligned himself with a specific party. His idea of freedom can therefore be interpreted as substantiated by an anarchic tendency, prompted both by the national division between the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats and by the international panorama troubled by the Cold War. I shall analyse this issue further in the last chapter.

To conclude, I shall argue that what ultimately frames together Oiticica's *Parangolé* and Manzoni's *Achromes* is the institutionalisation of an anti-aesthetics. In the next chapter I shall demonstrate how Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes adopt a constantly critical position towards both the socio-political context and an obsolete conception of works of art. These capes cannot be labelled as paintings, sculptures or architecture, and yet they are still categorised as works of art by Oiticica and by the institution. Nevertheless, owing to the required physical participation of the audience, *Parangolé* capes attempt to resist the site of the museum as the privileged exhibition space. Manzoni enacts a similar contradictory process, institutionalising an object that signifies nothing and denies the traditional idea of a work of art as associated with meaning and representation. In doing so he deliberately attempts the institutionalisation of a paradox.

⁹³ Gale and Miracco, *Beyond Painting*, 103.

Illustrations

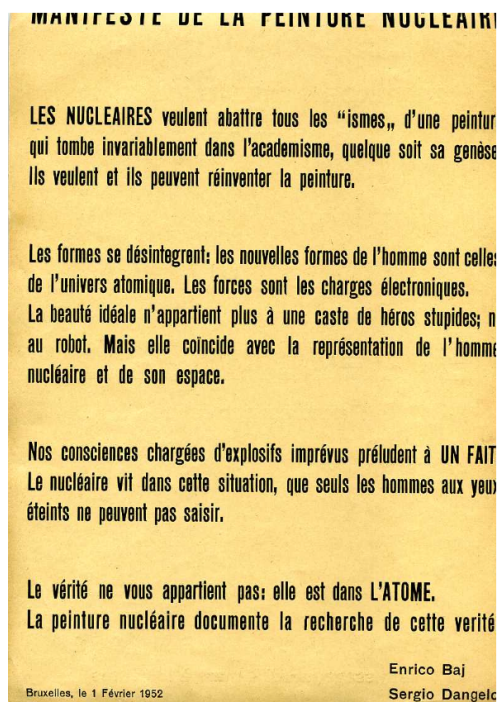


Fig. 1.1 *Manifeste de la peinture Nucléaire*,
Galerie Apollo, Brussels, 1 Feb. 1952.
Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate.



Fig. 1.2 'Baj et Dangelo,' exh, cat.,
Galerie Apollo, Brussels, Mar. 1952.
Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate

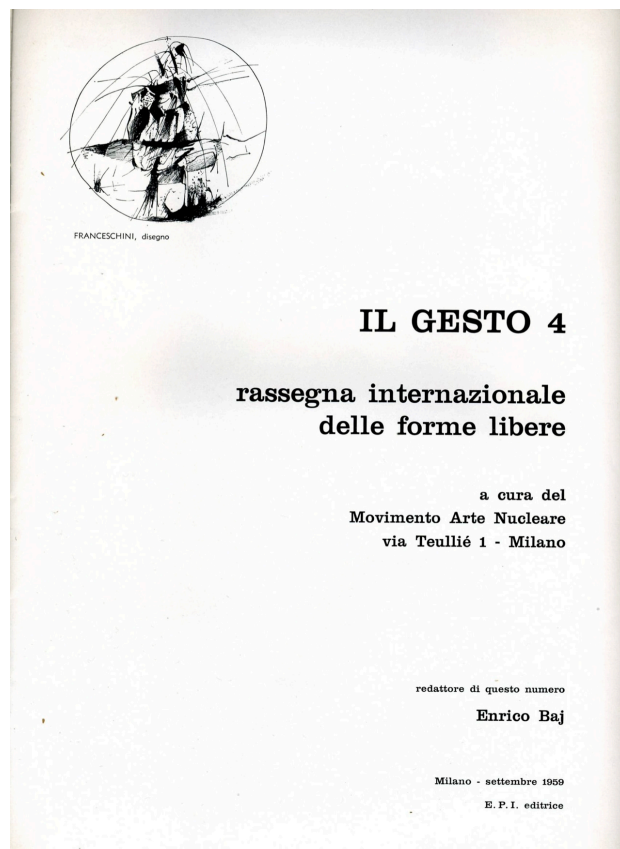
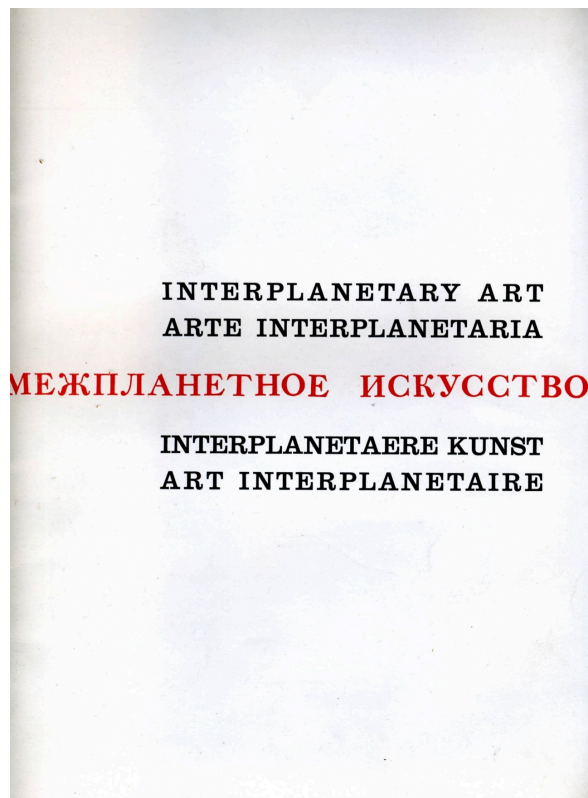


Fig. 2.3 // *Gesto*, issue 4, 1959, Milano, E.P.I.
front cover & first page. Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate.

DISTRIBUITO A CURA DEL MOVIMENTO ARTE NUCLEARE VIA TEULIÉ 1 MILANO GIUGNO 1957

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Et nous voulons, sans equivoque, établir ces présences.

En dehors de tout édonisme superficiel, de toute impression, de tout souvenir, nous désintégrons les phénomènes et les gestes pour découvrir les mouvements les plus intimes, pour faire ressortir l'essentiel du gratuit et le monadiser avec une exactitude absolue de façon à mettre l'évidence de chacun dans son germe le plus intime.

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GUIDO BIASI MARIO COLUCCI PIERO MANZONI ETTORRE SORDINI ANGELO VERGA

Fig. 1.4 Manifesto *Per una Pittura Organica*, released by the Nuclear Movement, via Teulié 1, Milan, June 1957. Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate,



Fig. 1.5 Enrico Baj, *Forme Nucleari* (Nuclear Forms), 1951. Private collection, Milan.



Fig. 1.6 Enrico Baj, 'Manifesto Bum,' 1952. Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate.

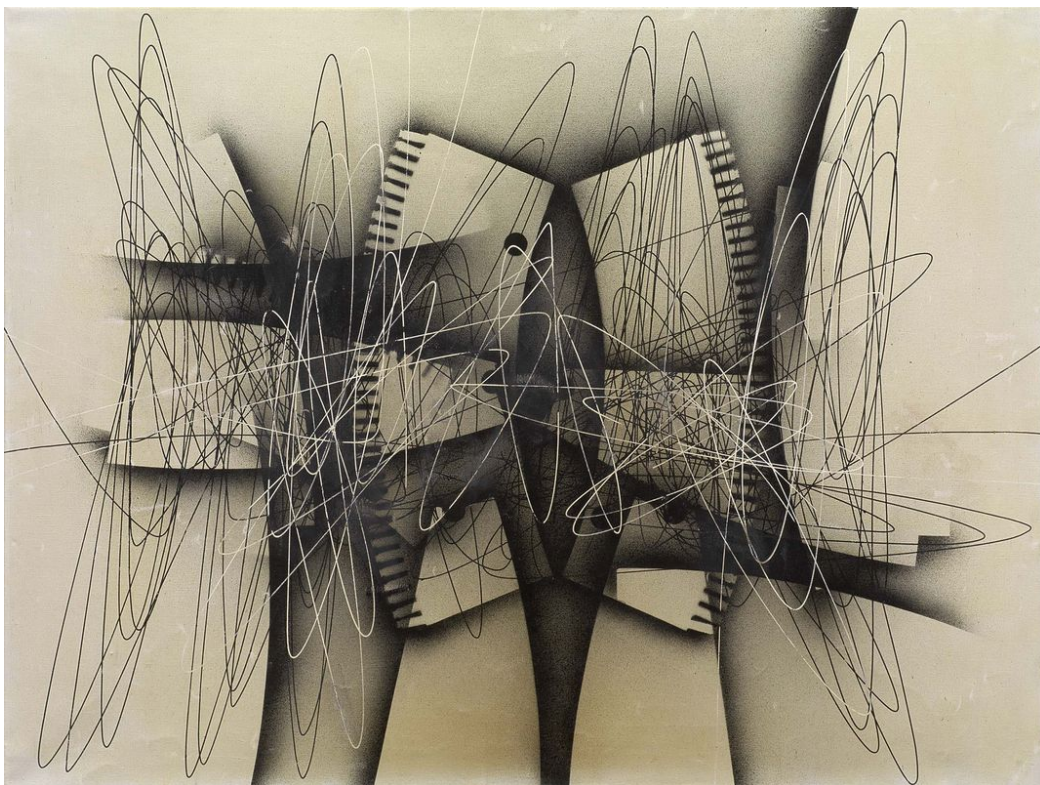


Fig. 1.7 Roberto Crippa, *Spirale* (Spiral), 1951, oil on canvas, 96 x 128.5 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 1.8 Mario Colucci, *Nuclei in movimento* (Nuclei on the go), 1963, oil on canvas, 71 x 48 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 1.9 Galleria San Fedele, Milano, *Arte Nucleare 1957*
12-30 Oct. 1957, exh. cat. Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate



Fig. 1.10 Galleria Montenapoleone, Milano, *L'avanguardia*, 27 May 1958, exh. cat. Courtesy of Archivio Baj, Vergiate.



Fig. 1.11 Enrico Baj & Piero Manzoni, *Arrivano gli Ultracorpi* (The arrival of the body Snatchers), 1958, oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 1.12 Manzoni, Piero, *Pinze* (Pliers), 1956-57, Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 1.13 Manzoni, Piero, *Paradoxus Smith*, 1957, oil on board, 100 x 130 cm, The Sander Collection.



Fig. 1.14 Piero Manzoni, *Untitled*, 1957
Oil and tar on canvas, 55 x 39 cm. Private collection

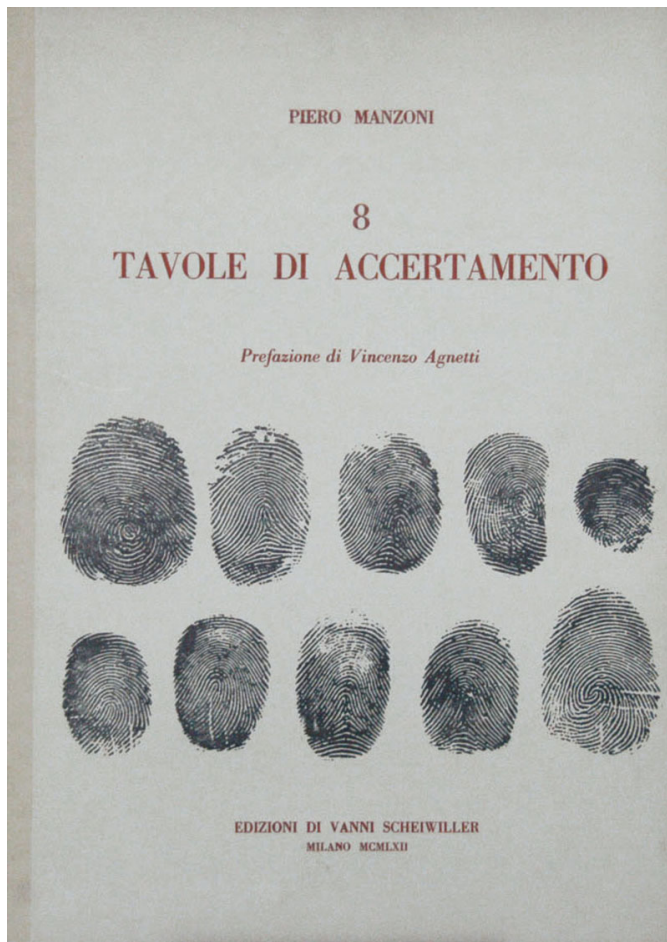


Fig. 1.15 Piero Manzoni, *8 Tavole di accertamento* (8 tables of assessment), 1962. Private collection.



Fig. 1.16 James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889, 1988*, oil on canvas, 252.7 × 430.5 cm. Getty Museum.



Fig. 1.17 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958, kaolin on canvas, 160 x 130 cm. FaMa Gallery, Verona.



Fig. 1.18 Piero Manzoni, *Achromes*, 1962, fibreglass on board, 40 x 40 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.



Fig. 1.19 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1957-1963, kaolin on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Staëdel Museum, Frankfurt.



Fig. 1.20 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome con panini* (Achrome with Breadrolls), 1961, kaolin on canvas, breadrolls, 31 x 31 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.



Fig. 1.21 Piero Manzoni, *Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico. Divorare l'arte* (Consumption of Art by the Art-Devouring Public), 1960, Azimut Gallery. Photo by Giuseppe Bellone.



Fig. 1.22 Piero Manzoni, *Achromes*, 1961, kaolin, straw, burnt wood, 105 x 58 x 58 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.

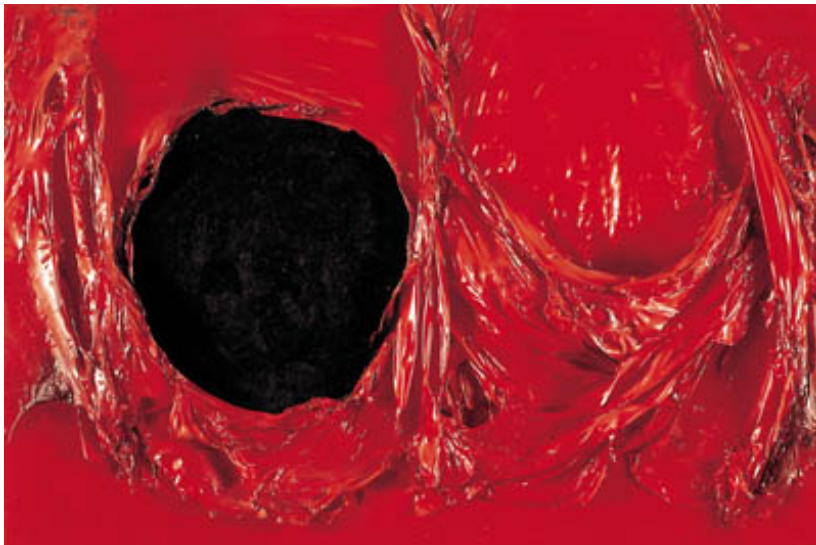


Fig. 1.23 Alberto Burri, *Rosso Plastica* (Plastic Red), 1962, plastic, acrylic, combustion on cellophane. Palazzo Albizzini Foundation, Burri collection.

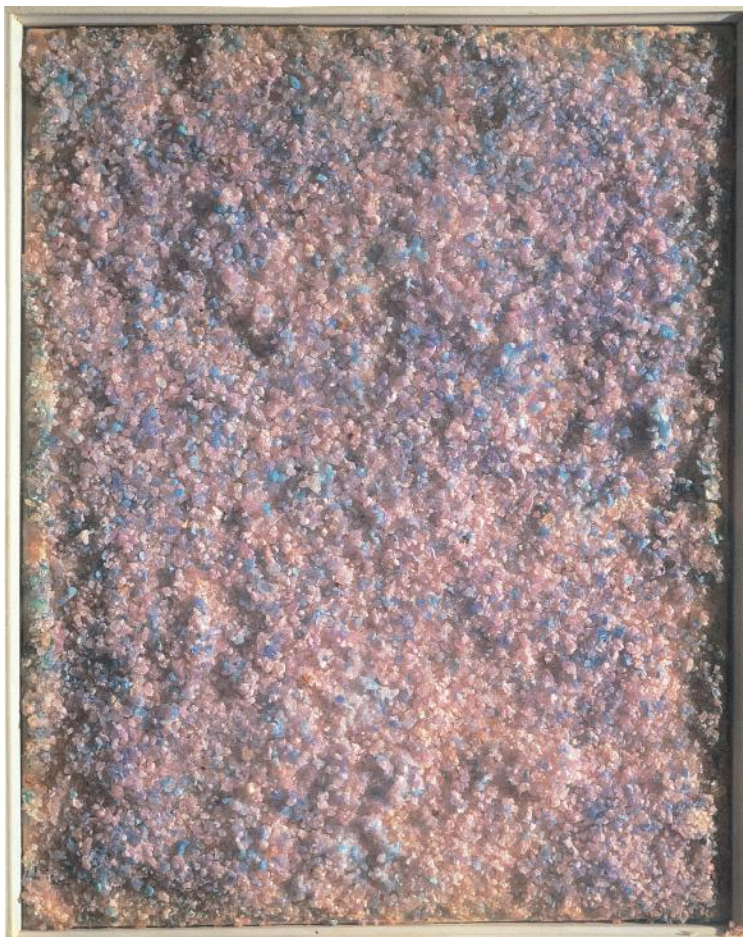


Fig. 1.24 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1960, cobalt chloride, 40 x 30 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation.



Fig. 1.25 Piero Manzoni, *Achromes*, 1961, rabbit fur, burnt wood, 105 x 50 x 50 cm. Private collection.

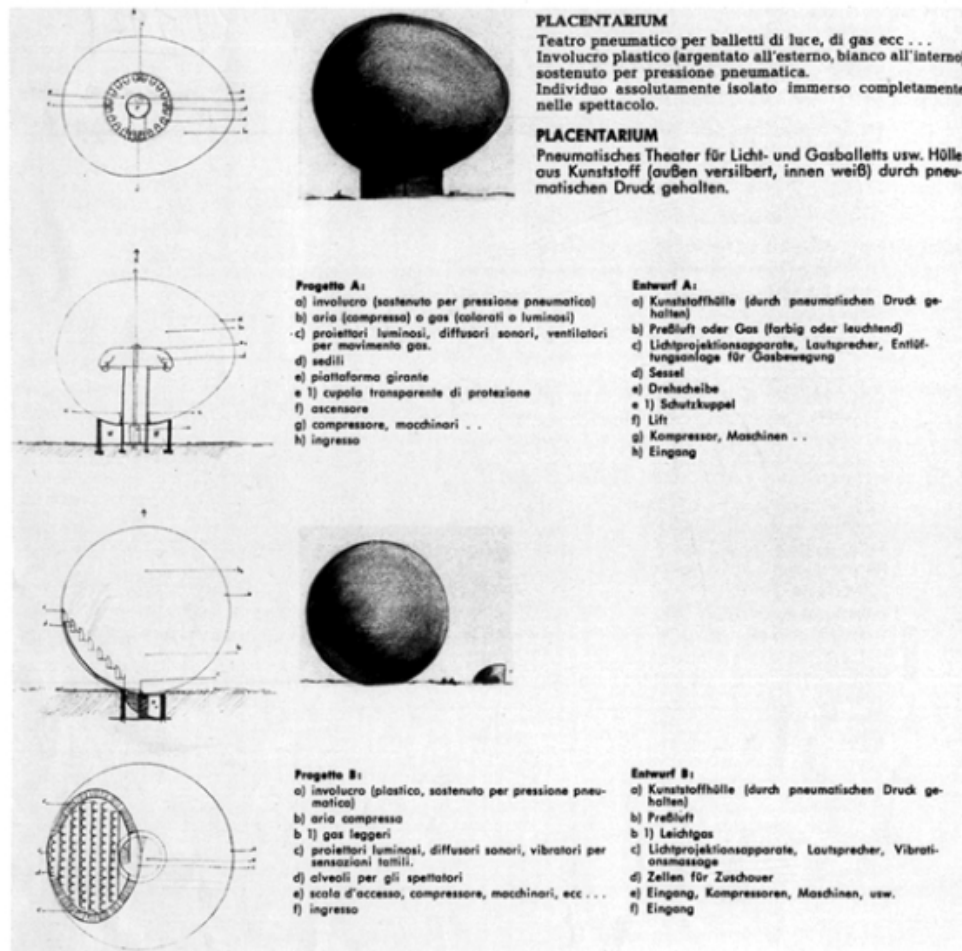


Fig. 1.26 Piero Manzoni, *Placentarium*, 1960
reproduced on Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni: catalogo Generale*
(Milano: Prearo, 1975).

Chapter 2

Redefining ‘neo-avant-garde’ in Hélio Oiticica’s work: Aesthetics Degree Zero

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the notion of neo-avant-garde and to propose the ideas of ‘anti-art’ and ‘zero’ as preferred categories to interpret both Hélio Oiticica’s practice and Brazilian modernism in general. In this chapter I focus on Oiticica’s writings mainly, as I do think it’s important to pin down his understanding of the notion of ‘neo-avantgarde’ and how it evolves over time. Before getting to the analysis of Oiticica’s texts and the concept of anti-art as a ‘degree zero’ art, I feel necessary to investigate the main characteristics of Latin American and Brazilian Art and how they have been treated by existing literature - already discussed in the introduction of this thesis. In this study, I follow ‘zero traces’, i. e. I indentify the most important moments of Brazilian modernism unfolding the ways in which they respond to a degree zero aesthetics. This is an important premise to my discourse on Oiticica, as it demonstrates that the search for a ‘cultural zero’ that I ascribe to the artist is nothing new in Brazil’s history of art. In this chapter, I therefore problematize and discuss the following issues: first, the main characteristics of Latina American avant-garde and how they have been ackoweldged and presented to the public by contemporary scholars and curators; secondly, the most significant moments in the development of the avant-garde in Brazil (ca 1920-1960); and finally, how the idea of avant-garde has been taken up by Oiticica in his writings, and how this concept, reflected and ‘performed’ in his works, can be explained in light of a degree zero aesthetics. The notion of ‘zero’ here employed - already discussed in the introduction and chapter one - derives from Barthes’ understanding of it and therefore describes not a neutral state but a constructive inclination.

The initial challenge concerning a discourse on Oiticica and the Brazilian avant-garde relates to the use of both western methodologies and terminologies

to define a non-western phenomenon. Looking at the existing critical literature on this matter, it is still not clear whether Latin American art should be defined by analysing its features on a global scale or in conformity to regional boundaries.¹ Moreover, the differences between categories of modernism, avant-garde, and neo-avant-garde when used in relation to Latin American twentieth-century art are entirely blurred. Modernism in Brazil is a paradoxical idea in itself. It aims to establish a national identity through the re-contextualisation of indigenous literature and myth, but it is equally imbued within a dense post-colonial heritage and is affected by foreign influences.

On the issue of transnational exchanges, scholar Wilson Martins parallels São Paulo with Milan, establishing the Italian historical avant-garde of Futurism as a preeminent source for Brazilian modernism and arguing that ‘the ideal triangle Milan-Paris-São Paulo furnishes us the perfect historic and aesthetic frame of Brazilian modernism’.² Pär Bergmann also investigates how Italian terms and concepts like ‘modernolatria’ (a neologism that can be translated as ‘the worshipping of modern times’) and ‘simultaneità’ (simultaneity) had a great impact on the Brazilian cultural scene.³ The equivocal attitude between internal and external sources is epitomised by the example of the Brazilian artist Anita Malfatti – notably defined by Wilson as ‘protomartyr of Modernism’ – who on the occasion of her second solo exhibition in 1917 was accused by Monteiro Lobato (December 1917) and Nestor Rangel Pestana (January 1918) of having abandoned her Brazilian identity in the favour of a ‘futuristic’ style.⁴ Several comparisons have been made between European historical avant-gardes and Latin American modernism. For instance, scholar Michael Korfmann affirms that the avant-garde in Europe pursued the rejection of any material representation or concrete form on the behalf of movement and colour, while the Brazilian

¹ Cf. Viviana Usubiaga, “Between Regionalism and Internationalism: Definitions of Latin American Art at the 1985 São Paulo International Biennale”, in *Translational Latin American Art from 1950 to the Present Day* (1st international research forum for graduate students and emerging scholars, the University of Texas at Austin, 6-8 November, 2009) 451-465, accessed January 14, 2014, URL: http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/meeting_margins/pdfs/forumabstractsforweb.pdf

² Wilson Martins, *The Modernist Idea: A Critical Survey of Brazilian Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 48.

³ Wilson Martins, *The Modernist Idea*, 47-48.

movement did not deny representation and sought to link international style with autochthonous forms.⁵

Adopting another point of view, scholar Mari Carmen Ramírez defines the Latin American avant-garde as characterised by a regressive utopia.⁶ The idea of utopia that has the double meaning of ‘no place’ and ‘good place’ – a term already employed to describe western avant-gardes – appears to be reductive and insufficient to define Latin American modernism. While European movements were driven by a thrust forward, Latin American artists went back to rediscover their pre-colonial past, thus merging a utopic attitude with a more ‘conservative’ or traditional one. The label ‘regressive utopia’ coined by Ramírez signifies the ‘emblem of a cultural project of emancipation’ representing the search for the ‘new’ in contrast with obsolete European cultural production.⁷ This concept is tied to another widely used label: ‘inverted Utopias’. The latter derives from Joaquín Torres García’s *The School of the South* (1935) [fig. 2.1], a manifesto and accompanying drawing that stressed the need for autonomous artistic practices based on the recovery of a pre-Columbian past.⁸ The turning upside-down of Latin America’s map was part of this project and aimed to challenge canonical division between North and South and the polarity between centre and periphery. Torres-García’s fascination with pre-Columbian art was not far from the primitivistic appeal that affected northern European movements, from post-Impressionism to Cubism. This looking at ‘other’ cultures was a strategy employed to subvert or challenge western culture itself. Similarly, the Latin American intellectual élite began to rediscover and to glorify its past in order to prompt formal innovation in contemporary practices. For instance, a great fascination with French Primitivism can be seen in the work of the writer Mario de Andrade, whose novel *Macunaíma: o herói sem nenhum caráter* (Macunaíma: The Hero Without

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Korfmann, and Marcelo Nogueira, “Avant-Garde in Brazil,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 28 (2004): 125, accessed January 15, 2014, doi: 10.1007/s10624-004-0480-z.

⁶ Mari Carmen Ramírez and Hector Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde in Latin America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 3.

⁷ Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 3.

⁸ Joaquín Torres-García, “La Escuela del Sur (1935),” in *Inverted Utopias*, 73.

a Personality, 1928) is patently influenced not only by Primitivism, but also by western anthropology, folklore and ethnography.

Returning to the issue of terminology, the historiographical debate around avant-garde/neo-avant-garde in Latin America is itself a ‘no man’s land’. The recurrence of the term ‘neo-avant-garde’ is not seen there, reflecting a rather confused situation: the first North American avant-garde of the forties is labelled as ‘neo-avant-garde’, while Latin American ‘neo-avant-garde’ (post-1945) tends to be defined as ‘avant-garde’, blurring the boundaries between those earlier practices and the new trends emerging in the fifties to which Oiticica belonged.⁹ Generally speaking, contemporary critique resists the adoption of a terminology used to name mainstream movements – for instance, scholar and artist Luis Camnitzer establishes a particular classification that adopts ‘Conceptual Art’ to define US practices and ‘Conceptualism’ with regard to Latin America.¹⁰ I argue that Brazilian modernism should not be reckoned as the overseas counterpart of western avant-gardes. Because of the lack of both cultural and socio-political prerequisites (such the advent of two world wars), it is impossible to trace such a split within Brazilian art history. I suggest that we can consider the whole Brazilian modern era – from the ‘Week of Modern Art’ (1922) to Oiticica’s practices – as a unified period of progression and evolution, in which each author, artist and style is inscribed in a dialectical movement and cannot be considered outside of a chronological trend.¹¹ Therefore in this thesis I will adopt and utilise both terms – avant-garde and neo-avant-garde – alternately, with no particular distinction, as I

⁹ See Olga Fernandes, “Uses of Conceptualism in Latin American Art Historiography,” in *Transnational Latin American Art*, 651-662.

¹⁰ See Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America Art: Didactics of Liberation*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

¹¹ Symbolically recognized as the emblem of Brazilian cultural renovation, the ‘Week of Modern Art’ was held in Sao Paulo at the *Teatro Municipal* on the 13th, 15th and 17th February 1922. Conceived as a celebration of the synthesis of the arts, the programme included an exhibition of 100 works by Anita Malfatti, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Vicente do Rego Monteiro among others; three-literary music sessions with lectures from Graça Aranha, Mario de Andrade, Menotti del Picchia alongside the music of Hector Villa-Lobos and others played by Guiomar Novaes and Hernani Braga. The fields of sculpture and architecture were also represented by Victor Bercheret, Antonio Moya and Georg Przyrembel. Modernist narratives praise the Modern Art week as a deconstructive counterpoint to the conservative attitude that pertained to the state of the arts in Brazil. The event had the ability to build a bridge between the different art forms; particularly, it established a dialogue between art and literature that remained constant throughout the duration of Brazilian modernism.

acknowledge them to be synonymous. This consideration can be made only in respect to Latin American practices; it would be obviously impossible to use the two terms interchangeably in a discourse on European art forms.¹²

In accordance with these premises, I will redefine the idea of neo-avant-garde as establishing a twofold narrative. On the one hand, I will demonstrate that the notion of ‘anti-art’ can be adopted in this context in place of the problematic ‘neo-avant-garde’, particularly in order to frame Oiticica’s practice. I will therefore discuss how Oiticica himself moulds this idea, considering its sources and its development. On the other hand, I shall assert that Oiticica’s ‘anti-art’ can be equally assimilated with a novel ‘degree zero’ aesthetics. I therefore argue for a degree zero aesthetics as the *fil rouge* that links Oiticica to Manzoni. This notion of ‘cultural zero’ is not extraneous to the literature on Oiticica. Scholar Sônia Salzstein affirms that the establishment of a cultural zero was necessary for Oiticica ‘to de-hierarchize the dependency between dominator and dominated’.¹³ This cultural zero is therefore the ‘condition for a new culture [...] expressed by the constructive lineage of modernity [...] stemming from Mondrian, from Neo-Plasticism [...] [in] whose heritage Oiticica would find affirmation for his deepest aspirations as to an aesthetic revolutionary experience, capable of becoming totally blended in a *social form*.’¹⁴ Scholar Sérgio Martins, building on Salzstein’s argument, locates Oiticica’s constructive will alongside the desire for a cultural zero to avoid any reliance on Europe.¹⁵ Furthermore, Martins affirms that Oswald de Andrade’s avant-garde project – which I will discuss later on in this chapter – was characterised similarly both by a nationalistic approach and by the drive

¹² Scholars have discussed the relation between avant-garde and neo-avantgarde at length, but this counts only for western artistic phenomena. See for example Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), etc.

¹³ Sônia Salzstein, “Hélio Oiticica: Autonomy and the Limits of Subjectivity,” *Third Text* 28 (1994): 122.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sérgio B. Martins, “Hélio Oiticica: Mapping the Constructive,” *Third Text*, 24 (2010): 412.

for a new zero cultural ground of infinite probabilities of experimentation and creation.¹⁶

Therefore, I am going to adopt the concept of a ‘degree zero’ aesthetics not only to emphasise Oiticica’s revolutionary will, but also to challenge the inner tension between a ‘devouring’ attitude towards international artistic models and the intention to establish a modern Brazilian cultural identity. ‘Degree zero art’ signifies the emancipatory thrust shared by Oiticica and by Brazilian modernism in general, as much as a ‘degree zero writing’ according to Barthes refer to a text purged from any over embellishment or class interest. Embracing a novel category such as ‘zero’ allows me to introduce a different viewpoint on both Oiticica’s and Manzoni’s practices, unfolding correspondences not yet taken into account by the existing literature. Running as a key concept throughout the first part of this thesis, ‘zero’ creates a narrative that links both artists together and therefore fulfils the goal of my investigation. Notably, scholar Boris Groys associates zero with avant-garde practices, placing the avant-garde ability to trigger perpetual mutations in its turning of all cultural signs into zero signs. Reduced *ad minimum*, zero signs ‘could be smuggled across the breaks, shifts, and permanent changes in cultural fashions and trends’.¹⁷ Groys’ sense of *ad minimum* is not in contrast with Barthes’ description of the word, already mentioned in the introduction, as at once essential but ‘pregnant of past and future significations’; the essentialism of the word is the key to its polivalency of meanings.¹⁸ An avant-garde that produced zero signs alongside weak images, such as Manzoni’s *Achromes* (from 1958) or Oiticica’s *Série branca* (1959), is, according to Groys, universal.¹⁹

Following on from the analysis of Manzoni’s *Achromes*, and how they respond to a zero aesthetics, in this chapter I shall construct my narrative around

¹⁶ I will explain the significance that Oiticica confers to the term ‘probability’ in the third chapter of this thesis. In a similar way to ‘possibilities’, ‘probability’ refers to the endless number of forms that an artistic object can assume.

¹⁷ Boris Groys, “The Weak Universalism” *efluxjournal*#15, 2010, accessed November 11, 2013, URL <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-weak-universalism/>.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 48.

Oiticica and touch upon some key moments that have characterised Brazilian avant-garde. Firstly, I will interpret Brazilian modernism through the lens of a zero aesthetics, thus considering it from a fresh perspective. Secondly, by following traces of 'zero', I will investigate Oiticica's idea of anti-art, conceived by the artist as the only frame appropriate to discuss Brazilian avant-garde.

This chapter is structured in three sections. At the beginning of the first section I discuss the contrast between ideas of 'avant-garde' and 'underdevelopment', and the advent of an avant-garde in an under-developed country. Following this I will describe the Latin American avant-garde's main features as 'heterogeneous' and 'hybrid'. Consequently, I will challenge Ramírez's and Hector Olea's 'constellatory model', adopted as curatorial strategy for the *Inverted Utopias* exhibition. In the last part of this section I will focus on certain aspects of Latin American conceptual art, understanding it as a 'social and political vector'.

The second section narrows the field of my discussion by concentrating on the Brazilian avant-garde. On this matter, I shall identify the following key themes: the 'Antropofagia' theory developed by Brazilian modernism in the twenties; the obsessive 'objecthood' that featured the Concretist movement in the 1950s; the inquiry on the state of the art object pursued by the Neo-Concretist moment at the end of the decade; and lastly, the multi-sensorial body experiences developed by Oiticica and his fellow artists during the sixties. In the third section I shall investigate Neo-Concretism's legacy and Oiticica's understanding of avant-garde in Brazil. I shall therefore establish the notion of anti-art as a zero aesthetics by surveying some of Oiticica's texts and main ideas, particularly the *Apocalipoptese* project and the *Parangolé*.

¹⁹ Boris Groys defines 'weak images' as follow: 'images with weak visibility, images that are necessarily, structurally overlooked when they function as components of strong images with a high

1. Latin American avant-garde: the 'regressive utopia'

In the present section I shall discuss the Latin American avant-garde, challenging the idea of avant-garde itself, its implicit demand for rupture and the unstable relationship of autonomy and dependency between Latin American and so called mainstream countries. I shall begin by discussing whether it is possible to apply the idea of avant-garde to an 'underdeveloped country'.²⁰ The answer depends on the ways in which Latin American artists developed 'inverted' strategies requiring a certain degree of autonomy from European counterparts. On this matter, Joaquín Torres-García argues: 'To plagiarise current European masters or to plagiarise those of classical times is the same thing – that's not what we must do; what we must do is to find the American man and the art of the Americas.'²¹ It can be inferred that Torres-García resists the hypothesis of adopting the western idea of the avant-garde to define cultural practices emerging in an underdeveloped country, as 'the real avant-garde is the one that in seeking the new secures the liberation of the human being starting from his own concrete national and international situation'.²² Mainstream avant-gardism was built around the idea of 'rupture' and a progressive attitude. On the contrary, the avant-garde in Latin America revised that concept and broke with the cultural hegemony established by Europe and its heritage by revising elements belonging to pre-colonial folklore. European and Latin American avant-gardes followed opposed dialectics. Ramírez affirms that 'neo-avant-gardes in Latin America postulated tendencies in opposition to the original concept of rupture with the past that motivated the European historical avant-garde'.²³ On this assumption I shall suggest that a 'break' is still pursued by avant-garde artists in Latin America; what differs is not the revolutionary attitude that yet combines European and Latin American

level of visibility, such as images of classical art or mass culture.' Ibid.

²⁰ Oiticica uses the term 'underdeveloped' to define Brazilian cultural background frequently in his texts. I therefore adopt it according to Oiticica's understanding. I am not in any way relying on third-worldist assumptions.

²¹ Joaquín Torres-García, "El Hombre Americano y el Art de América" (1941), in Hector Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez, eds., *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 369.

²² Ferreira Gullar, "Vanguardia," in *Inverted Utopias*, 330.

cultural contexts, but the object of such desire of rupture. ‘Ruptura’ for instance was the essence of the avant-gardism proclaimed by the Brazilian Concretist movement in the fifties.²⁴

Because of the association with European practices, avant-garde artists in Latin America engaged in an oppositional dialectic labelled as ‘regressive utopia’ that presented a synthesis between modernity and the ancient civilisations of the New World. This attitude however implied the risk of being trapped in post-colonial legacies: ‘Latin America has five centuries of being a colony, without any breathing space to assume itself. And the task was still there – to build its own culture’, alongside the rediscovery of its identity rooted in traditional folklore.²⁵ Both goals were achieved at two specific moments: first during the twenties and later between the fifties and the sixties. The twenties witnessed the consolidation of local identity and nationalism, while the late fifties were characterised by the rise of socio-political concerns – particularly evident in the work of both Oiticica and Lygia Clark.

1.1 ‘Heterogeneity’

In this section I will discuss what I consider to be the most important features of Latin American avant-garde. Firstly, I shall consider Latin America’s heterogeneity by giving some examples to illustrate the meaning and importance of this diversity. I argue that the notion of ‘heterogeneity’ discussed by Ramírez – together with ‘syncretism’ and ‘eclecticism’ – is essential and pertinent to Latin American modernism. Indeed, the occurrence of a myriad of artistic outcomes is caused by the fact that countries with different social backgrounds manifested non-uniform artistic developments at different moments. In Brazil for example, Cildo Meireles – following on from US Pop Art and the heritage of Duchamp – re-contextualised iconic everyday

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Claus Cluver, “The ‘Ruptura’ proclaimed by Brazil’s Self-Styled ‘Vanguards’ of the Fifties,” in David Hopkins and Anna Katharina Schaffner, eds., *Neo-Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).

²⁵ Luis Camnitzer, *On Art, Artist, Latin America, and Other Utopias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 10.

objects (see *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, 1970, [fig. 2.2] *Zero Cruzeiro* [fig. 2.3] and *Zero Centavo*, 1974-78) in order to criticise the mass-consumer society that had spread to Latin America from the United States. Cildo Meireles began to print unlimited but worthless *cruzeiro* banknotes and introduced them into free circulation in the market. The notes displayed a photograph of a native Brazilian and a photograph of a patient at a psychiatric hospital, which were both symbolic of the victims of the economic system. Equally, Meireles attempted to comment upon the fragility of third-world economies because of their dependency on foreign capital.

In Argentina, the legacy of the European CoBRA group prompted the emergence of figurative trends that were very different from the conceptual strategies developed in Brazil. An example is the Argentinian group *Otra Figuración*, created by Luis Felipe Noé, Rómulo Macció, Ernesto Deira and Jorge de la Vega. In the same context, the revival of social realism coexisted with the arrival of some European informal practices, including *Arte Povera*, soon after it first emerged in Italy. European post-war art became popular in Argentina thanks to Alberto Greco who, influenced by the work of Yves Klein and presumably also by Manzoni, linked in his practice neo-figuration to conceptualism and implemented the use of poor materials.²⁶ This is not surprising as the ideas of hybridism – recently contested by Michael Asbury – transculturation and assimilation had always been the kernel of the Latin American avant-garde's theoretical discussion.²⁷

²⁶ 'Greco is credited with having finished the validity of the cycle of painting with his blue paintings. Less clear is Greco's relationship with Piero Manzoni whom he must have known and who signed models in 1961 as part of his "Live Sculptures" project'. Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007) 295.

²⁷ Michael Asbury, "Some notes on the Contamination and Quarantine of Brazilian Art", in *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics*, ed. Pauline Bachmann et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink GmbH & Co, 2017). For example Asbury considers Tarsilia do Amaral's painting *A Negra* (1923) as a 'hybrid prototype' since it problematises 'the distinction between the representation of the other and self-representation' and therefore stands for a 'projection of identities rather than her own'. Affirming that 'hybridity is problematic as a means of identification not because of what it enunciates or what it makes visible but because of what it conceals', Asbury examines the symbolic meaning of the mulatto for Brazilian modernists as the 'hybrid symbol of economic transition between sugar cane slave labour and immigrant man power of coffee and beyond'. He finally argues that assuming hybridity as an overarching quality of Brazilian genealogy provides only a partial understanding as it ignores 'the possibility of a conjunction of practices and ideas that possess distinct (or disjunctive) genealogies'.

Assuming that Latin American avant-garde movements aimed to construct national identities – differently to being a late international reflection on an earlier avant-garde – involves the importance of understanding Latin America as heterogeneous. Heterogeneous histories gave birth to multivalent practices. I therefore argue that the importance of the concept of heterogeneity in reference to Latin American practices does not fit with the ‘constellatory model’ theorised by Ramírez and Olea to present Latin American art on the occasion of the exhibition mentioned above *Inverted Utopias* (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004).²⁸ This accompanying collection of essays became the main interpretative source for Latin American modern and contemporary practices, as well as one of the few catalogues that gathered and discussed works and artists from all Latin American countries. In this project, the curators aimed to overcome a linear and fixed art historical approach, while also using an open model capable of revealing the paradoxes of ‘marginal’ Latin American modernism.²⁹

They also tried to move away from developmentalist concerns, while still separating Latin American art from wider transnational exchanges. The exhibition was articulated around various constellations: ‘Universal and Vernacular’, ‘Play and Grief’, ‘Progression and Rupture’, ‘Vibrational and Stationary’, ‘Touch and Gaze’ and ‘Cryptic and Committed’. The risks attached to the adoption of this methodology are several. Firstly, it reinforces the use of arbitrary and dogmatic aesthetic categories and its consequently cryptic language may confuse the audience. Secondly it tends to convey a biased view of Latin American avant-gardes by only shedding light on their negative aspects – while their positive traits are represented by mainstream art.³⁰ Indeed, it differentiates artistic practices on a horizontal axis without involving any vertical investigation that would take into account pre-colonial

²⁸ ‘We propose to replace this obsolete framework with a constellatory reading of critical groups and tendencies whose dialectical tension hints at the emergence and consolidation of these countries’ avant-garde trends’, Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, xvi.

²⁹ I am using the term ‘marginal’ here as a provocation. Chapter 4 discusses the issue of ‘marginality’ in Oiticica’s practice, its ambiguities and implications.

³⁰ See for example the label ‘regressive utopia’ already discussed above. The word choice ‘regressive’ – a quite negative terminology – necessarily requires a term for comparison, in this case represented by European utopia.

histories.³¹ This would be similar to considering Europe as a coherent and monocultural country, disregarding its complex heritage: ‘Each of our nations has its own unmistakable individuality; we are all different in accordance with our country’s historical evolution, through which we develop our own social and cultural topology’.³² Latin American avant-garde artists were influenced by a paradoxical concept of tradition as they were shaped by the accumulation of experiences coming from North American and European trends plus the recovery of vernacular roots. Because of this hybrid notion of tradition – a constant oscillation between the old and the new, assimilation and contamination – Latin American art practices feature ‘an irreverent syncretism and a formal eclecticism’, epitomised by Brazilian *Antropofagia*.³³

1.2 ‘Art as social vector’: the *conceptual* turning point

In this section I will discuss the understanding of art as social vector.³⁴ I will explain this conception according to different registers: the importance of the text, the dematerialisation of the art object, the practice of re-contextualisation and the relation between politics and aesthetics. These ideas stood at the basis of the emergence of *conceptual* art practices rooted in a socio-political background from the sixties onwards and played an important part in Oiticica’s work.³⁵ I will conclude this section by undermining Ramírez’s theory on ‘the rejection of the new’.

³¹ Both Mari Carmen Ramírez and Hector Olea curated a similar exhibition in 2000, again analysing *modernidade* under seven different categories. This model did not take into consideration indigenous art. See Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Hector Olea, eds., *Heterotopías: Medio siglo sin-lugar, 1918-1968: Versiones del sur* (Madrid: Museu Nacional Centro de Art Reina Sofia, 2000). A critique to this strategy can be read in Francisco Godoy, “El Modelo Constelar: heterotopias y su estela,” paper presented at *Encuentros Transatlánticos: discursos vanguardistas en España y Latinoamérica*, International Congress, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, July 11-13, 2013).

³² Afrânio Coutinho, “¿Qué es América Latina?,” in Olea and Ramírez, *Resisting Categories*, 326.

³³ Mari Carmen Ramírez, “A Highly Topical Utopia: Some Outstanding Features of the Avant-Garde in Latin America,” *Resisting Categories*, 4.

³⁴ I borrow this expression from Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 12.

³⁵ I am using italics here on purpose to emphasise how this term has an open-ended connotation, encompassing diverse practices. Not absorbed by modernism, conceptualism paved the way for postmodernism. In Latin America conceptual art did not signify the dematerialisation of the art object but witnessed the emergence of socio-political performances. This thread will gradually unwind in this thesis.

The expression ‘art as social vector’ signifies a deep engagement with local political and social issues. This is mainly visible since the advent of the sixties when artistic practices strived to overcome the gap between the élite and the social masses, or rather between a transcendent aesthetic dimension and everyday life. Latin American artists theorised art as an integral part of an activist’s intellectual life to the point that the role of the artist merged into that of a social actor who influenced public opinion by undermining the values of contemporary society. This strategy favoured the production of manifestos, polemical literature, confrontational literary surveys and public performance events. In western conceptual art – that took place in North America and Europe – the importance of text went hand in hand with the development of semiotics and structuralism; the analysis of language turned into the analysis of the system of language itself, in a tautological manner. The interpretation of artworks undertook a similar twist. The object was indeed deprived of its material connotations and became a pure container filled with ‘philosophical implication’.³⁶

Joseph Kosuth for instance, canonically considered the founder of conceptual art in the mainstream thanks to the essay *Art after Philosophy* (1967), played on the opposition identified by semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure between the signified and the signifier. The artist went even further, to the point of overcoming René Magritte’s paradoxes by incorporating text into the work of art in order to focus the attention of the viewer not on the object itself but on the idea of it. Kosuth indeed did not conceive of language as a chain of signs and as the conceptual representation of the referent, i.e. the object.

Generally speaking, in Latin America language acquired a different significance, becoming a tool to express communication, information and

³⁶ ‘Each “art object” is atemporal and meaningless in itself, but it does have ‘philosophical implications’, which Kosuth does not wish to deny or reject.’ Excerpt from Joseph Kosuth, ‘Notes on Conceptual Art and Models,’ in Luis Camnitzer et al., eds., *Global Conceptualism – Points of Origin, 1950s-1980* (New York: Queens Museum of Art: 1999), 78.

political dissatisfaction, thus acquiring pedagogical connotations.³⁷ Scholar Alexander Alberro argues that the risk in this strategy was to adopt a ‘dominant’ language, symptomatic of the ruling class. On this matter, Oiticica in the essay ‘Brazil diarrhoea’ remarks on the importance of the creation of a new language that is void of external references.³⁸ The hypothetical language suggested by Oiticica acts both as a counterpart to a new Brazilian society and as a tool to overcome memories of the colonial past: ‘our greater enemy: four centuries-old moralism (of white, Christian Portuguese origin) – paternal Brazil – the cultivation of “good habits” – the super self-consciousness – the national constipation’.³⁹ Through his practice Hélio Oiticica employs a political use of language: being a very prolific writer, the artist used to incorporate statements of protest into his *Parangolé* capes, emblematic works that I will go on to investigate later in this chapter. Combining the aesthetic with the social dimension, Oiticica creates a new vocabulary by merging neologisms with folkloristic terms. The words ‘Parangolé’ and ‘creilesure’ are part of this process. By combining the Portuguese word ‘lazer’ (leisure) with ‘crer’ (to believe) or ‘criar’ (to create), Oiticica defines ‘creilesure’ as the ‘apex of human desire’; this idea is materialised through the works *Tropicália* [fig. 2.4] and *Éden* which are interactive environmental installations.⁴⁰ *Tropicália* was exhibited in 1967 at the MAM in Rio de Janeiro and included *Penetráveis* PN2 and PN3, TV programmes, tropical birds and plants, gravel, sand and other objects in a labyrinthine setting under the heading ‘A Pureza é um Mito’ (Purity is a myth) [fig. 2.5]. *Éden* was staged, together with *Tropicália*, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1969. Compared to the abstract features of *Tropicália*, *Éden* displayed a clear allusion to the architecture of the favelas [fig. 2.6].⁴¹

³⁷ A considerable interest in semiotics was seen also in Latin America, for example in the practice of artist Mira Schendel and others. However here the interest in semiotics was less influential than in the United States or in Europe. Semiotics will be discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

³⁸ Hélio Oiticica, “Brazil Diarrhea”, in *Hélio Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte De With, Centre for Contemporary Art, 1992), 17.

³⁹ Hélio Oiticica, “Brazil Diarrhea”, in *Helio Oiticica*, 19.

⁴⁰ Since ‘crer’ means ‘to believe’ and ‘criar’ ‘to create’, ‘creilesure’ holds the ambivalent meaning of ‘to create (for) leisure’ and ‘to believe in leisure’. See *Hélio Oiticica*, 132.

⁴¹ A deeper analysis of both installations will take place in chapter 4 of this thesis.

Among the other conceptual devices adopted in the sixties, in mainstream conceptual art the dematerialisation of the art object was a consequence of the theoretical speculation both on the notion of art itself, and on the formal play on reductionism that followed minimalism. Camnitzer sets up a clear distinction between ‘conceptualism’ and ‘conceptual art’.⁴² The latter refers to mainstream practices that emerged in connection with minimalism, while the former is related to the process of shifting from the object to the idea. In Latin American, the so-called dematerialisation of the art object did not really take place; following on from a shift in tenor and context, the work of art became a political tool, accessible to a greater audience and made with cheap materials. It was indeed more about the way in which artists could rethink ‘materiality’ – an expression used by scholar Michael Newmann in place of ‘dematerialisation’.⁴³ Therefore, in order to challenge the exaggerated importance conferred on its tangible form, Latin American artists deprived the object of its original significance by making it an empty container, an ‘open work’ to be filled with extra meanings.⁴⁴

For this reason the process of reducing the object ad minimum always went alongside the practice of re-contextualising it in a different environment. This method was embraced not only by artists who deliberately adopted Pop art strategies, such as Cildo Meireles, Waldermar Cordeiro and Antonio Caro, but also – according to Camnitzer – by Oiticica himself, who appropriated the ‘power of the vernacular’ as a means of communication, and at the Argentinian meta-exhibition *Tucumán Arde* [fig. 2.7], which functioned in a similar way.⁴⁵ Camnitzer defines this phenomenon as ‘appropriationism’, while Alberro establishes the link between ready-made strategies and Latin American conceptual art under the label of ‘media art’. The scholar argues that Latin American artists employed ready-made media to reflect an ideological and

⁴² See Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art*. As I mentioned in the introduction, the choice to use a diverse terminology was also a pretext to resist an imported artistic vocabulary.

⁴³ Michael Newmann, “The Material Turn in the Art of Western Europe and North America in the 1960s,” in Milena Kalinovska and Paulo Herkenhoff, eds., *Beyond Preconceptions: The Sixties Experiment* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2000), 73.

⁴⁴ See chapter 3 of this thesis for a discussion on the idea of the open artwork as inherited from semiology.

⁴⁵ See L. Camnitzer, *On Art*.

political commitment behind their apparent neutrality.⁴⁶ On this matter Cildo Meireles himself, talking about his *Insertions*, affirms that they were meant to take a direction opposed to Duchampian ready-mades in order to establish distance from the French artist and his strategy. According to Meireles, ready-mades were everyday objects made unique through a subjective process of re-collocation; conversely *Insertions* started off from a subjective dimension in order to reach a global scale. Scholar Paulo Herkenoff emphasises their political impact by comparing Meireles' *Insertions* to the tactics adopted by the urban guerrilla depicted by Carlos Maringhela in *Minimanual do Guerrilheiro Urbano* (1969).⁴⁷

In Meireles and fellow artists' strategies, the aesthetic dimension was tainted by the political sphere. This prompted a twofold dialectic defined by Camnitzer as a 'politicisation of the aesthetic' and an 'aestheticisation of politics'.⁴⁸ The former concept was epitomised by a group of artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires, who, in 1968, gave birth to the cultural project named *Tucumán Arde*. The collective of organisers intended to resist the recent privatisations in the agricultural region of Tucumán, which had been enacted during the regime of Juan Carlos Onganía. The artists approached both the inhabitants of Tucumán and the trade unions, and finally organised an itinerant exhibition of protest. This was ironically entitled '1st Biennial of Avant-Garde Art' and essentially consisted in a montage of audio-visual media, in addition to appearances by artists, intellectuals and experts. One of its purposes was to overcome the limits imposed by the avant-garde in choosing the museum as the only appropriate site for artistic manifestation. Argentinian artists sought to create a total work of art, outside the institutional contest, that would have an impact on society and would aim to unite art and everyday life.

An "aestheticized politics" was instead adopted by the urban guerrilla group of the *Tupamaros* (1960s-1980s) in Uruguay. They were initially a non-violent

⁴⁶ Alex Alberro, "A Media Art: Conceptualism in Latin America in the 1960s," in Michael Newmann, and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art: Critical Views* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 140-151.

⁴⁷ See André Mesquita, "Máquina de Conceptualismo Insurgente," in "Irrupciones al Sur: Nuevas Formas de Antagonismo Artístico-Político en América Latina", *Tercerotexto*, 2 (2011).

⁴⁸ See L. Camnitzer, *On Art*.

political movement that constructed political propaganda through cultural devices. Camnitzer argues that the level of aesthetics achieved in publicity or military communication means that the group can be considered as almost a cultural phenomenon.⁴⁹

Mari Carmen Ramírez discusses another key quality of Latin American avant-garde, namely ‘the rejection of the new’, an assumption based on the canonical opposition between the old and the new as the prerequisite for the emergence of an avant-garde.⁵⁰ Contrary to their European counterparts, Latin American artists pursued both the rediscovery of indigenous traditions and the assimilation of international models. They aimed not to reject the new but to explore a traditional face of the ‘new’ rooted in the local folklore; it was to be both expressive of a national identity and capable of gaining international recognition. The Latin American avant-garde was simultaneously international and autochthonous in its orientation, and artists strived to interact with their European fellows while maintaining their own cultural exigencies at the same time, thus positioning themselves in between a universal and a vernacular register.

To conclude I want to summarise the various contributions that this section offers to the overall argument. It has provided a new frame to investigate Latin American avant-garde by following a twofold dialectic: on the one hand stressing the notion of ‘heterogeneity’ as a condition for the development of every narrative within Latin American modernism; on the other, addressing the idea of art as ‘social vector’ and reflecting on its implications. It has also discussed and problematised Mari Carmen Ramírez’s model by demonstrating how the scholar still retains a comparative approach based on positive or negative parameters – in effect, we are left with the question: utopias are *inverted* in respect to what? Lastly it introduces important themes with respect to both Brazilian avant-garde and Hélio Oiticica’s practice.

⁴⁹ See L. Camnitzer, “Art and Politics: the Aesthetics of Resistance”, in *On Art*. 63-75

⁵⁰ See Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*.

2. The case of Brazil

The purpose of this section is twofold. I will firstly demonstrate Brazilian artistic autonomy from the rest of the continent. Secondly, I will construct my narrative based on Oiticica's notion of anti-art by following traces of the 'zero' aesthetics in Brazilian modernism.

Modernism in Brazil was 'officially' inaugurated by 'The Week of Modern Art' (1922) and became popular thanks to Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropofágico* (1928) [fig. 2.8] that conferred to the movement a strong theoretical background.⁵¹ Indeed Antropofagia contributed to distinguishing the differences between Brazil and the rest of the continent. Hector Olea discusses whether Brazil even belongs to Latin America by considering the country's linguistic isolation and cultural independence.⁵² The idea of 'splendid isolation' informed the Brazilian empire from 1822 to 1889 and is exemplified by the works of monarchic authors such as Joaquim Nabuco, Silvio Romero and Eduardo Praso.⁵³ The effort to become somehow disconnected from the rest of the continent further negates the efficiency of Ramírez's horizontal axis of interpretation already discussed. On the matter of Brazilian ethnic origins and civilisation, Manoel José do Bomfim (1868-1932) recounts:

Two camps in Brazil, the Westernists and the Brazilianists, were always in opposition regarding an interpretation of Brazilian civilization. The former considered Brazil a mere extension of white European civilisation, and advocated subordination to Western culture by means of its Portuguese heritage and the Catholic Church. These were the society's aristocrats who prevailed until this century; the others, the Brazilianists, considered Brazilian society a native product [...]. It was not European,

⁵¹ Michael Asbury has recently questioned the importance of *Antropofagia* as a movement: 'The Anthropofagite Manifesto itself has little impact within the local production in its own time, since the year after it was published, the international market crash of 1929 changed the character of Modernism in Brazil.' The impact that the advent of anthropophagy had is unquestionable along with its discrepancies within the socio-political context, which are emphasised by Asbury. Antropofagia was a theoretical model adopted by artists, writers and cultural practitioners owing to its international appeal. Nonetheless it greatly impacted cultural production, especially thanks to its revival at the end of the fifties. Michael Asbury, "The Uruborus Effect," *Third Text* 26 (2012):145.

⁵² Héctor Olea, "The Continental Utopia", in H. Olea, and M.C. Ramírez, *Resisting categories*, 50.

⁵³ Notably scholar Nikos Papastergiadis argues 'culture never exists in a pristine or predetermined space of splendid isolation [...]' in Nikos Papastergiadis, *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference* (London: Rivers Oram, 2003), 9.

Portuguese, Negro or Native, but rather a product of this melting pot, something new, original and distinct: Brazilian civilization.⁵⁴

In my opinion, this melting pot is another key feature of Brazilian modernism – articulated around three important moments, namely the anthropophagus movement in the twenties, the Neo-Concrete trend at the end of the fifties and ‘conceptual’ practices from the sixties onwards.

2.1 *Antropofagia*, or the culture of ingestion

In this section I will examine closely the notion of *Antropofagia*, its meaning and its heritage. Quoting Gerardo Mosquera, Michael Asbury points out how de Andrade’s *Antropofagia*, Ortiz’s transculturation and ideas of periphery and eurocentrism ‘are invoked not to overcome a sense of disparity but to affirm a particular local accent, making an art that differentiates itself from that in other geographical regions.’⁵⁵ Indeed in Brazil, *Antropofagia* epitomised the emancipation from European models and functioned as *tabula rasa* in a new era; this is best exemplified by the following:

We are aborigines of a future perfection [...]
We are the new primitives in a new era.⁵⁶

Because of its humour and references to both western and local heritage, the manifesto became a symbol of Brazilian modernism – already inaugurated by both Anita Malfatti’s exhibition in São Paulo (1917) and ‘The Week of

⁵⁴ Afrânio Coutinho, “What does Latin America mean?” (1969), reproduced in Mari Carmen Ramírez et al. eds., *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 325.

⁵⁵ Michael Asbury, “The Uroborus Effect”, *Third Text* 26, 1 (2012): 141-147. On the matter of ‘transculturation’, Fernando Ortiz writes: ‘Transculturation is a set of ongoing transmutations; it is full of creativity and never ceases; it is irreversible. It is always a process in which we give something in exchange for what we receive: the two parts of the equation end up being modified. From this process springs out a new reality, which is not a patchwork of features, but a new phenomenon, original and independent’, Ortiz quoted in GIRA, Interdisciplinary Research Group, accessed July 13, 2013, www.gira.info.

⁵⁶ Oswald de Andrade (first line) and Lygia Clark quoted in Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 3.

Modern Art'.⁵⁷ The following excerpts from the manifesto best exemplify the important role of *Antropofagia* as a paradigm of the Brazilian avant-garde:

Only anthropophagy united us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.
The only law in the world. The masked expression of all individualism,
of all
Collectivism. Of all religions, of all peace treaties.
Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question [...]
Only what isn't mine interests me. The law of men
The law of the anthropophagus...[...]
Anthropophagy. The absorption of the sacred enemy. In order to transform
the enemy into a totem.⁵⁸

Using the reference to Hamlet to introduce the mention of the Tupinabá population, the passage argues for notions of assimilation and contamination as key strategies of *Antropofagia*, which theorised the necessity of adapting and transforming foreign elements into something that possessed an indigenous Brazilian voice. *Antropofagia* did not stand for a brutal or physical cannibalism of the other; it instead aimed at its sacred assimilation.

The idea of a 'sacred assimilation' is rooted in the antecedent European tradition. Saint Augustine (AD 354-430) in the book *De Doctrina Christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*, AD 397-426) argues for a only partial rejection of pagan culture, which would retain its good elements. The philosopher theorised the concept of the 'sacred theft':

So if it is true that the doctrines of the pagans contain false and superstitious or unnecessary elements that each of us, in the words of Christ, out of the pagan society should hate and avoid, it is also true that the liberal disciplines are adaptable to the "use of the truth" and here always are, among the pagans, useful moral precepts and even references to the worship of one God.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Many references and influences can be detected in the manifesto: philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), 'Totem and Taboo' by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Surrealist writers such as André Breton (1896-1966) and particularly the *Manifeste Cannibale* (1920) by Francis Picabia (1879-1953) and the ideas on the 'savage' discussed by both Michele de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778).

⁵⁸ Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropofago," *Revista de Antropofagia*, 1 (1928), trans. Hector Olea in Ramirez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 466-467.

This ‘method of appropriation’ responded to the orthodoxy’s need to support the mission of the Church; by adopting the same theoretical attitude, the Anthropophagus strategy intended to forge a Brazilian cultural identity. Drawing from the ‘sacred theft’ – a concept deeply rooted in the European tradition – *Antropofagia* became the main source for interpreting Latin America in the twentieth century and according to the one who shaped it theoretically, the only possible strategy to overcome its marginal position. However, two problems can be noted in the adoption of such a theory, beyond the obvious risk of plagiarism. The first is that it might reassert European art as the hegemonic model par excellence by embodying a subaltern position. The second is that it swallows and rearticulates European dominant heritage but from a marginal position – thus failing to make any impact on western culture. Indeed, ‘colonial artists believed that they make the choice in total freedom’, but in fact they were subordinated to both their history as a colonial country and to western art heritage.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the ‘sacred theft’ of European avant-garde movements prompted the emergence of non-mimetic practices, which I discuss later on in this chapter.

2.2 Concretist rationality versus Neo-Concretist phenomenology

Brazilian modernism was championed by a pair of artistic movements that emerged in reaction to each other. In this section I investigate the foundations of the Concretist movement and the rupture pursued by Neo-Concretism, while focusing on their theoretical background. In this respect, I will also take into consideration Noigrandes literature and by means of the analysis of the poem ‘O amago do Omega’ (1946) by Haroldo de Campos, I will introduce the

⁵⁹ Aurelius Augustinus, *L'Istruzione Cristiana* (Scrittori Greci e Latini: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla 1994), 89, my translation.

⁶⁰ See Luis Camnitzer, ‘Contemporary Colonial Art (1969),’ in *On Art*, 8-15.

notion of degree zero aesthetics in order to suggest the adoption of such a category to frame the Brazilian avant-garde.⁶¹

The First National Exhibition of Concrete Art held in Sao Paulo from 4 to 18 December 1956 and transferred to Rio in 1957 was an important cultural event for Brazil. For the first time, artists belonging to the São Paulo-based Grupo Ruptura and the Rio-based Grupo Frente were shown together. Both groups played on a mode of geometric abstraction that echoed the style of Bauhaus, De Stijl, Soviet Suprematism and Constructivism. Notably, Max Bill had a prominent impact on Latin American post-war tendencies. The Swiss artist had been given a retrospective of his painting, sculptures and architectural projects in São Paulo in 1950; he was exhibited at the Biennale in 1951; and he returned to Brazil two years later to lecture in both the cities of São Paulo and Rio. Brazilian Concrete artists must also have been familiar both with the works of the ‘Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención’, founded by Tomás Maldonado in Buenos Aires and which exhibited in Rio in 1953, and with the works of the Milan-based ‘Movimento Arte Concreta’.⁶²

Although, as already explained, the birth of the Brazilian Concrete movement has been always attributed to the influence of Max Bill in Brazil, other schools of thought argue for a local genealogy by emphasising the importance of the works made at the painting atelier hosted at the Engenho de Dentro psychiatric hospital in Rio de Janeiro. As suggested by Paulo Herkenoff, ‘geometric art in Rio has a remote origin in the occupational therapy sector of the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II (the so called Engenho de

⁶¹ Noigandes were a Brazilian avant-garde group making Concrete poetry. The group takes its name from a neologism in an Ezra Pound poem and was founded by Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari; they published the manifesto *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* in 1958.

⁶² The M.A.C. movement exhibited in Santiago de Chile: *Exposición de los artistas italianos del “Movimento Arte Concreta” de Milán, presentada por el Instituto de Arquitectura de la Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. Sala de Exposiciones del Ministerio de Educación: Santiago. Hital Miramar: Viña del Mar*, July 1953 (artworks by Allosia, Biglione, Di Salvatore, Dorfles, Mazzon, Mesciulan, Monnet, Munari, Nigro, Parisot). In September of the same year the group held another exhibition in Latin America: *Mostra del M.A.C., Amigos del Arte, Santa Fe, Rosario*, 1-10 September 1953 (artworks by Allosia, Biglione, Di Salvatore, Dorfles, Mazzon, Mesciulan, Monnet, Munari, Nigro, Parisot); they exhibited in Argentina again in July 1954 at *Pintores italianos contemporáneos*, Krayd Gallery, Tucumán, presented by Gillo Dorfles (artworks by Allosia, Biglione, Di Salvatore, Dorfles, Mazzon, Mesciulan, Monnet, Munar, Nigro, Parisot).

Dentro Hospital) directed by Nise da Silveira'.⁶³ Influenced by the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Gustav Jung, Nise da Silveira sought to develop new therapeutic treatments for patients affected by schizophrenia, dismissing methods such as lobotomy, electroshock and insulin-induced coma as obsolete and intrusive. The workshop was based on different activities like painting, modelling, woodcutting, theatre and several others, and it ran from 1946 to 1951. It subsequently prompted the creation of the Museum of the Images of the Unconscious (1952) to display and collect the works made by patients. Notably, the workshop was directed by Almir Mavignier, and attracted the interest of other eminent contemporary artists, namely Abraham Palatnik and Oiticica's mentor Ivan Serpa, and the art critic and theorist Mario Pedrosa. According to sociologist Glaucia Villas Bôas the activity of the workshop prompted a manifestation of what she calls an "aesthetics of conversion": the conversion of the mentally ill into artists and of figurative artists into concretists".⁶⁴ Mavignier abandoned 'naturalistic painting' in favour of an art that relied on the autonomy of forms alone; Palatnik began his 'kinechromatic' experience – a term coined by Pedrosa himself – combining light and movement; and Ivan Serpa turned towards geometric abstraction, founding the Rio-based Grupo Frente and taking on an antagonistic stance against the stiff rationality of forms pursued by the Grupo Ruptura.

Indeed, although both trends experimented with geometric abstraction, the São Paulo-based movement played on the rhetoric of visual forms, whereas the Rio de Janeiro-based group emphasised the relation between art and life. The influence of Concretism reached Oiticica through his father, José Oiticica Filho (1906-1964), who at the beginning of the fifties was making abstract-geometric photographs; Oiticica himself was trained by Ivan Serpa and he was part of the Grupo Frente between 1954-1955. The participation of nineteen Brazilian artists belonging to both groups Ruptura and Frente in the international exhibition *Konkrete Kunst* – organised by Max Bill in Zurich in

⁶³ Paulo Herkenoff, "A overture planar de Lygia Clark – de Caracóis, escadas e Caminhando," in *Lygia Clark* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna São Paulo, 1999) 49.

⁶⁴ Glaucia Villas Bôas, "A estética da conversão : o ateliê do Engenho de Dentro e a arte concreta carioca (1946-1951)", *Tempo Social, revista de sociologia da USP* 20 (2008): 205, my translation.

1960 – was the most significant display of Brazilian Concrete art ever achieved outside the country. The Concrete avant-garde movement prompted the emergence of Neo-Concretism at the end of the decade.

Neo-Concretism inaugurated its activity with the *Manifesto Neoconcreto*, published in 1959, written by Ferreira Gullar and signed by a group of dissidents belonging to the Grupo Frente.⁶⁵ Emerging in reaction to Impressionist technique and the magical realism developed by Dada and Surrealism, Neo-Concretism conceived of the work of art as a ‘quasi-corpus’, enhancing its phenomenological qualities. Neo-Concrete artists were fascinated by the concept of the ‘supra-sensory’ that emanated from internal mental constructions rather than from external stimuli. In their practice they stressed the importance of matter and the notion of synaesthesia; through acting on the senses, their work aimed to appeal to the tactile gaze of the audience. Mário Pedrosa coined the concept of ‘multi-sensoriality’ in 1949; other sources were Henri Bergson’s theories and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*. The latter explained ‘perception’ as bodily existence converted in the act of being, the condition for ‘être-au-monde’ (being in the world).⁶⁶

Besides certain differences in theory, the Neo-Concretists did not reject Concretist abstraction as a whole; they in fact employed similar forms but escaped the boundaries set by a rational understanding of the art object which was turned into a vehicle of the imagination. If the Noigrandes poets defined the poem as an object not to be interpreted by subjective sensations, Neo-Concretists, drawing on Gullar’s *Theory of the Non-Object* (1960), argued for a new subjective experience both in art and in literature:⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The manifesto was originally published in the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro) on the 22 March 1959 and was signed by Amílcar de Castro, Ferreira Gullar, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Raynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanudis. Although Hércules Barsotti, Willys de Castro and Hélió Oiticica did not sign the document they each joined the Neo-Concretist movement some time later.

⁶⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

⁶⁷ ‘It’s an object per se, not an interpreter of external object and/or sensations more or less subjective’, A. de Campo, H. de Campos, D. Pignatari, ‘Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry’, 1958, in Rachel Price, ‘Object, Non-Object, Transobject, Relational Object: From ‘Poesia Concreta’ to “a ‘Nova Objetividade’”, *Revista de Letras* 1 (2007): 33.

The term non-object is not intended as a means of labelling an object as negative or anything else that could be constructed as the opposite of material object with properties that are diametrically opposed to those other objects. The non-object is not an anti-object but rather a special object in which to synthesise both sensory and mental experiences: a corpus that is transparent to phenomenological knowledge, perceptible in its integrity, and can be perceived without leaving a trace. It is pure appearance.⁶⁸

Neo-Concrete artists questioned the status of the object within the frame of a non-figurative art, deliberately refusing the objecthood of Concretism and its theoretical ambiguity between object and non-object. Concretism seemed to celebrate the rational presence of the object while also emphasising the importance of its negativity and its absence, which led to some contradictions. This is demonstrated by Haroldo de Campos' poem 'O âmago do Ômega' [fig. 2.9]:

O Âmago do Ômega

no

â mago do ô mega

um olho

um ouro

um osso

sob

essa pe(vide de vácuo) nsil

pétala p a r p a d e a n d o cilios

pálpebra

amêndoa

do vazio pecìolo: a coisa

da coisa

da coisa

un duro

⁶⁸ Excerpt from Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto," *Jornal do Brasil, Sunday supplement*, November 21, 1960, in Ramírez and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 521. This manifesto was translated for the first time into English by Hélio Oiticica, 28/29 May 1968.

tão oco
 um osso
 tão centro

 um corpo
 cristalino a corpo
 fechado em seu alvor

 zero ao
 zênit

nitescendo ex-nihilo.⁶⁹

In the published version of the poem the words are coloured white and they stand out against a black background; the whole composition is cleverly articulated around the interaction between positive and negative spaces, disclosing an ode to the concept of zero, or of the void. The notion of zero accentuates that ‘creation ex-nihilo comes from both the outside and the inside of the poet, who must perceive the artwork objectively and not subjectively’.⁷⁰ In the nothingness described by Concrete poets, zero refers not to the creative process but to the immateriality of the object itself. The idea of *tabula rasa* is not new to this context, as Torres García had already introduced it in his essay *Universalismo Constructivo* (1944) where he discusses the birth a ‘Universal-constructive Art’ that takes ‘little or nothing of what has been produced in art lately’.⁷¹ In this text the author theorised a radical collapse of the old world of the arts. In this manner, his attitude is similar to Manzoni’s understanding of zero discussed in the previous chapter.

It can be inferred that both Concrete and Neo-Concrete artists and poets built upon this same narrative of ‘zero’ that I argue performs in Oiticica’s practice. Moreover, this idea of zero as a return to origins appears to be linked to the understanding of the avant-garde in an underdeveloped country, since it

⁶⁹ Haroldo de Campos, ‘O âmagô do ômega’, in Rachel Price, *Object*, 36.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

epitomises the tension emergin from the desire of emancipating from both European hegemonic culture and the country's colonial heritage. I shall argue that the 'act of devouring' as well as notions of 'rupture' and 'new objectivity' are no longer the only labels useful to frame Brazilian modernism: a zero aesthetics identifies the new constructive will that features in the new art from Latin America, while at the same time expressing the tension mentioned above.

2.3 At the dawn of participation: Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark

The various movements of vanguard art which first appeared at the Neoconcrete exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, in January 1959 share a common objective: to set in permanent motion the mechanism of experimentation. The production resulting from the use of various experimental languages labelled as 'New Figuration, Happening, Pop Art, Kinetic Art, Conceptual Art, Body Art, Video Art, etc ...' has grouped itself in several vanguard movements some already well defined historically, such as the New Objectivity or Tropicalism.⁷²

In this section I consider Oiticica's and Lygia Clark's proto-conceptual art practices. I use the term 'conceptualism' not to assimilate their practice to mainstream conceptual art but to emphasise the shift in tenor between their art and previous Neo-Concretist works. At the end of this section I focus solely on Oiticica's practice, discussing key notions of marginality and anti-art. Aiming to establish a 'new-objectivity' in art, artists such as Oiticica, Clark and Lygia Pape saw the limits of the progressive industrial culture connected with the Concretist trend and therefore looked for a novel way of responding to their contemporary period. After an initial Neo-Concrete phase, in which both Oiticica and Clark played with geometry, space and colour, both artists began to focus on the body and life-experiences ('vivências'), stressing the importance of concepts such as 'intuition', 'creativity' and 'subjectivity'. They did not engage with 'body art' according to the idiomatic meaning of the expression; rather they analysed the corporeal multi-sensorial experience of the

⁷¹ Torres García, *Universalismo Constructivo*, reproduced in Ramíre and Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 550.

⁷² Hélio Oiticica, *Contemporary Brazilian Art*. Carlos Vergara, AHO/PHO 0087/78, 1978, accessed April 13, 2013. URL: <http://www.itaucultural.org.br/programaho/>

individual within the environment. Both Clark and Oiticica engaged in new forms of participatory art while taking opposite directions: Clark focused more on subjectivity and the self – to the point that her art merged into psychoanalysis – and Oiticica's supra-sensory exploration dealt with both social and architectural spaces.

Their friendship is famously represented by the metaphor of the glove: Oiticica embodies the outside, and Clark the inside [fig. 2.10]. 'The two of us exist from the moment there is a hand which puts on the glove' Clark said.⁷³ Whatever the direction, if from the universal to the particular or viceversa, both artists undertook a shift towards both the dismantling of the art object and the inclusion of the spectator in the work. They sought to challenge the authorship of the artist conceived no longer as 'a creator for contemplation but as an instigator of creation.'⁷⁴ Oiticica and Clark attempted to overcome the inner failure of the western historical avant-garde, whose aspiration remained locked up in utopic dimensions and which maintained the gap between the intellectual elite and the masses. In fact, Oiticica argues: 'Today the phenomenon of the avant-garde in Brazil is no longer the concern of a group coming from an isolated elite, but a far reaching cultural issue of great amplitude, tending towards collective solutions.'⁷⁵ This statement might sound quite odd, as the artist was part of the same bourgeoisie from which he wished to distance himself. His father José Oiticica Filho was not only the most important Brazilian photographer of his time, but also an engineer, mathematics teacher and entomologist. Oiticica's grandfather José Oiticica (1882-1957) was a well-known philologist, teacher, writer, anarchist and editor of the newspaper *Ação Direta*. His aunt Sonia Oiticica was an actress. Oiticica was very much influenced by this intellectual elite. Equally, the encounter with the favela of Mangueira had a notable impact on his practice. But it did not constitute the only 'driving force'. He was also never fully accepted by the community of the

⁷³ Lygia Clark quoted by Guy Brett, "Situation to be lived," in Sabine Breitwieser et al., eds., *Vivências, Life Experience* (Wien: Generali Foundation, 2000), 46.

⁷⁴ Hélio Oiticica, *Position and Program*. This text is dated July 1966 and it was firstly published on the catalogue of the exhibition *Aspiro Ao Grande Labirinto*, Rio de Janeiro, 1986 and republished in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999) 63.

shantytown that was sometimes quite hostile to him: the myth of the populist artist needs to be discussed.⁷⁶ Oiticica deliberately chose a marginal position, to be always a step outside both of these worlds, neither of which he ever fully belonged to.⁷⁷ This led to an experimental attitude and to the rejection of any imposed aestheticism, a condition that merged with Oiticica's understating of anti-art.

My thesis on Brazilian cultural autonomy from the rest of the continent has been testified by addressing some key moments in Brazilian modernism, namely de Andrade's Antropofagia, Concretism and Neo-Concretism. In this context I have aimed to differentiate Oiticica's practice by looking at his ambivalent position in society and at his shift from experiments in colour, space and shape to a participatory practice. In the next section I shall construct my narrative around zero by analysing Oiticica's understanding of anti-art.

3 Hélio Oiticica's Anti-Art

During the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-85), Hélio said he wanted to find a way 'to explain and justify the appearance of an avant-garde in an underdeveloped country not as a symptom of alienation but as a decisive factor in its collective progress. He did not he added 'allow himself the luxury of holding naïve expectations about the influence of art, whose political validity is, after all, rooted in its existence as an experimental diagram of society'.⁷⁸

I shall discuss Oiticica's understanding of avant-garde art by analysing his writings. The use of primary sources instead of secondary literature is necessary in order to analyse the way in which the artist's ideas evolved over the years. This section will not only unfold Oiticica's conception of avant-

⁷⁵ Hélio Oiticica, "General Scheme of the New Objectivity," in *Hélio Oiticica*, 110-120.

⁷⁶ See Michael Asbury, "Oiticica couldn't dance," in Paula Braga, ed., *Fios Soltos: A Arte de Hélio Oiticica* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 2008) 52-65; Michael Asbury, *The Uroborous Effect*, 141-147.

⁷⁷ I am going to develop the ambiguous notion of marginality in respect to Oiticica's practice in chapter 4.

⁷⁸ Lucy Lippard quoting Hélio Oiticica in "The Materials at Hand: Art, Work and Life. Geco, Clark, Schendel and Hesse," in Olea and Ramírez, *Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 50.

garde, but also attempt to augment my narrative on zero, notably arguing that a degree zero aesthetics matches with Oiticica's understanding of anti-art.

In 'Situação da vanguardia no Brasil (Proposta 66)', the artist situates Brazilian avant-garde in the wake of a new objectivity, different from that of contemporary American Pop Art and French Nouveau Réalisme.⁷⁹ Brazilian modernism considers the primordial structure of the work of art which is conceived as open. The artist is the creator of objects no longer experienced by the audience through sight alone, but through all the senses. For Oiticica the new objectivity opens the field of the imagination. At the end of the essay the artist discusses key goals of the Brazilian avant-garde, namely the creation of a new perceptual object – tactile, visual and propositional – that is able to challenge an institution and its dogmas. The Brazilian avant-garde is addressed by the artist not as a superimposed aesthetic category but as a force that prompts action, in line with Oiticica's criticism of the artistic tactics employed by European modernism – collage, montage, parody and alienation – that attempt to educate an audience who is only marginally involved in this progressive change.

The second essay taken into examination is a collective manifesto entitled 'Declaração de principios básicos da vanguardia' (1967) that was a preface to the exhibition 'Nova Objetividade Brasileira' at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro that featured Oiticica, Clark and Pape among others.⁸⁰ This manifesto numbers the key characteristics and goals of the Brazilian avant-garde as follows:

- i. An avant-garde movement does not rely only on a specific country but could happen anywhere at any time;
- ii. When an avant-garde occurs, it immediately requires a link between the artist and the environment and the assemblage of a new language capable of giving voice to contemporary development;

⁷⁹ AHO/PHO 0248/66, 1966, accessed April 13, 2013, URL: <http://www.itaucultural.org.br/programaho/>

⁸⁰ This was the first exhibition dedicated to avant-garde in Brazil after the military coup in 1964. The manifesto was signed by Antonio Dias, Rubens Gerchman, Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, Mauricio Nogueira Lima, Hélio Oiticica, Ana Maria Maiolino, Fedrerico Moraes et al. Excerpt published in M.C. Ramírez, and H. Olea, *Inverted Utopias*, 537.

- iii. Avant-garde does not copy classical models but implies a creative impulse;
- iv. Avant-garde is a trend that challenges everything that has become institutional;
- v. Every member of the movement carries on his own project as well as a communal activity;
- vi. The movement is not influenced by demands and rules imposed by the art market;
- vii. The movement adopts various communicative strategies from newspaper to debate, from street to park, from assembly hall to factory, from pamphlet to cinema, from radio to television.

These principles read as less radical assumptions compared both to Oiticica's 'Proposta 66', analysed above, as well as to his later writings. In the same catalogue of the 1967 exhibition Oiticica published 'The General Scheme of the New Objectivity' articulating his idea of the avant-garde around the following points:

- 1. General constructive will
- 2. A move towards the object, as easel painting is negated and superseded;
- 3. The participation of the spectator (bodily, tactile, visual, semantic, etc. ...);
- 4. An engagement and position on political, social and ethical problems;
- 5. A tendency towards collective prepositions and consequently the abolition, in the art of today's, of 'ism', so characteristic of the first half to the century (a tendency which can be encompassed by Mário Pedrosa's concept of post-modern Art')
- 6. A revival of and a new formulation of the concept of anti-art.⁸¹

Influenced by Ferreira Gullar's theories that encouraged artists to assume an ethical stance against the bourgeoisie, Oiticica advocates for a public role of the artist as educator.⁸² Regarding the spectator, the artist defines two modes of participation: sensorial-corporeal and semantic. The audience involved in this practice is meant not only to experience the environmental work of art, but to

⁸¹ Hélio Oiticica, 'General Scheme of New Objectivity,' in *Hélio Oiticica*, 110-120. Notably the will to dismiss all the 'isms' also features in the Italian Nuclear Manifesto (1952) in a striking, similar way. The Nuclear Manifesto will be discussed in chapter 2.

⁸² See Ferreira Gullar, *Cultura posta em questão; Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento: ensaios sobre arte* (Rio de Janeiro: Jose Olympo Editora, 2002).

complete its open meaning as well.⁸³ The artist concludes by synthesising the key point of Brazilian avant-garde stating ‘of ADVERSITY WE LIVE!’. The comparison between this manifesto and the essay ‘Proposta 66’ stresses the emergence of both a progressive revolutionary attitude and a personal self-awareness.

In ‘Trama da terra que treme (o sentido da vanguarda do grupo baiano)’, Oiticica redefines an avant-garde of resistance under a violent regime.⁸⁴ Indeed he mentions the popular Grupo Baiano as the symbol of the struggle against the military dictatorship, stressing the importance of Antropofagia, Concretism and Neo-Concretism as new critical positions. The artist also emphasises the importance of both public participation and the creation of collective situations, alongside the rejection of the form of ‘happening’. He resumes by criticising notions of beauty, good taste and morality as fixed ideological categories and also mentions Mário Pedrosa’s motto ‘the experimental exercise of freedom’. This statement is in turn epitomised by the *Barração*, a community of intellectuals that aim to challenge and transform contemporary artistic creation.⁸⁵

In a pair of writings from 1969, Oiticica discusses another key theme of the Brazilian avant-garde: the *Apocalipópótese*.⁸⁶ The latter – a fusion of the Portuguese words for ‘apocalypse’ and ‘hypothesis’ – was coined by Rogerio Duarte to describe a certain kind of experience related to the concept of *projeto*, wherein the work of art does not accomplish definite qualities but remains a purely open and germinal structure. *Apocalipópótese* took place on 4 August 1968 at ‘Aterro do Flamengo’. The event witnessed the participation of many ‘sambistas’ (samba dancers) from the favelas of Mangueira, Villa Isabel, Portela and Salgueiro, as well as the presentation of new works including

⁸³ Chapter 3 will be dedicated to this issue.

⁸⁴ AHO/PHO 0280/68, 1966, accessed April 13, 2013. URL: <http://www.itaucultural.org.br/programaho/>. The strong alliteration of the title of the text is a reference to the strophe 42 of ‘O Inferno de Wall Street’ in ‘O Guesa Errante’ by the poet Sousândrade. See Paula Braga, “A trama da terra que treme. Multiciplidade em Hélio Oiticica,” (Ph.D. diss., University of São Paulo, 2007) 80.

⁸⁵ Notably a contemporary re-enactment of the *Barração* was created by American artist Lee Jaffe in the São Paulo Nara Rosler Gallery (02/09/2026-05/11/2016).

⁸⁶ AHO/PHO 0381/69 and AHO/PHO 0387/69 both October 9, 1969, accessed April 13, 2013, URL: <http://www.itaucultural.org.br/programaho/>.

Antonio Manuele's *Urna Quentes* and Lygia Pape's *Ovos*. Oiticica presented some new *Parangolé* capes including *Guercavalía*, displaying the portrait of Che Guevara, and *Nirvana* [fig. 2.11].⁸⁷ *Parangolé* capes are colourful robes, banners or tents worn by samba dancers, fusing together the participation of the spectator with space, movement and colour. According to Oiticica, *Parangolés* notably materialise the idea of anti-art:

Parangolé is the definitive formulation of what environmental anti-art is, precisely because in these works, I was given the opportunity, the idea of fusing together colour, structures, poetic sense, dance, words, photography [...] and I intend to extend the practice of 'appropriation' to thing[sic] of the ambient world, thing which would not be transportable, but which I would invite the public to participate in. This would be a fatal blow of the concept of the museum.⁸⁸

By both 'Appropriating the ambient world' and 'provoking a fatal blow of the concept of the museum', I argue that the *Parangolé* capes attempt both to erase the modernist conception of institution – understood as both the museum as physical space and the idea of art as a system of values – and to constitute a zero point of invention in line with both the *Anthropofagia* and Neo-Concrete movements already discussed. In the next section I am going to analyse Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes further as well as the idea of anti-art; concurrently I will build my discourse on Oiticica's practice upon a zero narrative.

3.1 *Parangolé* capes: constructing a zero narrative

As a result of their complexity and multiplicity of meanings, the *Parangolé* capes can be interpreted from diverse perspectives. This section focuses on two themes. Firstly, I examine the history of this series, its premises and how it came into being. I demonstrate that Oiticica's *Parangolés* are the result of a tension between an anthropophagic attitude towards European constructivism

⁸⁷ See Frederico Moraes, "Apocalipópótese no Atêrro: arte de vanguarda levata ao povo," *Diário de Notícias*, July 26, 1968; Vera Pedrosa, "Apocalipópótese," *Correio da Manhã*, July 27, 1968; Vera Pedrosa, "De Capêlio a Guercavalía," *Correio da Manhã*, August 10, 1968.

⁸⁸ Hêlio Oiticica, 'Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto', in *Hêlio Oiticica*, 78.

and the anti-art will for a cultural zero. Secondly, I shall develop the connection between the *Parangolé* and Oiticica's notion of anti-art.

The tension in Oiticica's thinking between appropriating western practices and what I have called the anti-art will for a cultural zero should not, I argue, be conceived as rupturing the artist's practice. Therefore, my aim will be to demonstrate how both stances coexist in Oiticica's practice from his 1950s production onwards. As art historian Luke Skrebowski points out, Oiticica's work can be divided into phases. Each phase raises specific challenges that are not necessarily resolved by the subsequent one. This movement can be read as dialectical, according to the Hegelian notion of *aufhebung*: each new concept stems from the sublation of the previous one in an almost fluid development, a cyclic *motus* of recurring elements.⁸⁹ Accordingly I shall emphasise the tension in Oiticica's project as the *impetus* of moving beyond restricted paradigms, arguing at the same time that this rupture is deceptive in respect to his whole artistic production, since the different stages of his practice are still, I argue, linked to each other.

In apparent contrast to the position outlined above, in 1972 Oiticica asserted: 'there's no reason to take seriously my pre-'59 production'.⁹⁰ Oiticica's sentence refers to the exhibition of the *Metaesquemas* (1957-58) [fig. 2.12] and it is useful to unravel the artist's lack of confidence in his first pictorial experiments.⁹¹ Oiticica himself acknowledges his artistic development as follows:

I started out with Ivan Serpa in the Grupo Frente in 1954 ... although, in my opinion, it wasn't until the Neo-Concrete movement that I began to propose a way out into space: the disintegration of the painting and all that. That's when I really started to create something absolutely peculiar and mine.⁹²

⁸⁹ Luke Skrebowski, "Revolution in the Aesthetic Revolution," *Third Text* 26 (2012): 65-78.

⁹⁰ Hélio Oiticica, *Metasquemas 57/58*, in *Hélio Oiticica-Metasquemas*, (São Paulo, Galeria Raphael Camargo, 1972).

⁹¹ I would like to clarify that the statement quoted above is dated 1972 but accompanied the exhibition of the works he made between 1957 and 1958; also, Oiticica's negative judgement doesn't refer only to the first gouaches on cardboard he produced around the mid-1950s but also to the more mature abstract geometric paintings dated at the end of the decade.

⁹² 'Ivan Cardoso entrevista Hélio Oiticica,' quoted in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Luciano Figueiredo *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color*, (London, Tate Publishing, 2007) 67-68.

Despite Oiticica's methodological desire to document every phase of his artistic production, the first years of his career – until he joined the Neo-Concrete movement in 1959 – are marked by a lack of significant writing and therefore are more difficult to analyse in depth.

Between 1955 and 1959, Oiticica produced markedly different kinds of work: the Grupo Frente paintings (1955-56) [fig. 2.13], the *Metaesquemas* (1956-57) [fig. 2.14] and the *Serie Branca* (*White Series*, 1958-59) [fig. 2.15]. These abstract geometric paintings progressively evolve to the point of constituting the foundation of the *Parangolé* capes. In showing this, I will clarify why the *Parangolés* can be treated as degree zero works of art. Lastly, I will illustrate how the *Parangolé* capes epitomise Oiticica's notion of anti-art; from there I will take a step further, demonstrating how Oiticica's idea of anti-art merges with my understanding of a zero aesthetics, proposing the latter as a useful interpretative frame.

Playing with physical and metaphysical possibilities of colour, the gouaches on cardboard that Oiticica produced under the apprenticeship of Ivan Serpa show the clear influence of Paul Klee's lyrical abstraction. Only at a later stage, between 1957-1958, did Piet Mondrian become his primary source of inspiration: the geometric shapes that constitute Oiticica's *Metaesquemas* are organised according to the rational principle of the grid and they follow a mirror effect. Embarking on this continuous movement, these forms reproduce a certain rhythm, based on the succession of presence and void. Often harmonised in regular patterns, these geometric figures are arranged on the canvas like notes on a stave. The music they produce is a monotone that stresses the seriality of a recurring gesture. Colour is a crucial concern for Oiticica in this phase, although it is not the only one. Being always associated with time and structure, and having in its components scrutinised with an alchemical vision, colour emphasises the material and plastic qualities of the painting. Indeed, for Oiticica the structure does not exist *a priori* but is generated through colour. All artworks produced during these years already appeal to the tactile gaze of the audience by revealing the supra-sensorial

qualities of the object.

The shift between geometric abstraction and a ground zero practice – which would lead to the conception of the *Parangolé* capes a few years later – is represented by Oiticica's white monochromes. Kazimir Malevich is the undeniable reference for the white paintings grouped under the label of *Série Branca* (*White Series*, 1958-1959). Notably, Oiticica does not refer to Malevich as the primary source of his *Série Branca*; instead he focuses on Mondrian. The Russian artist would gain greater recognition by Oiticica only during the years he spent in New York.⁹³ However, I argue that Malevich's influence on Oiticica's practice is fairly evident even in the artist's earlier works. Carrying on with his research on pigments, Oiticica chooses white as the colour that light produces through synthesising all other colours. What might have been seen as the end of his research on colours actually develops into a new starting point: Oiticica appropriates from Malevich not only his formal reductionist technique but also the significance of taking a step further from 'value contrast' by the act of painting white on white. Why does he choose *White on White* [fig. 2.16] and not the *Black Square* (1915)? As Martins argues, Oiticica's constructive will deals with history.⁹⁴ Therefore, the dialectical *aufhebung* mentioned above, which demands continuity with the past, is guaranteed only by appropriating white (on white).

Scholar Gonzalo Aguilar witnesses the importance of this (non-)colour, affirming that, 'At the end of the sixties, white implies, on the one hand, the knowledge of the materials used by art and on the other, the opening to the infinity, to the absolute', thereby ascribing to its use an immanent stance.⁹⁵ 'Infinity' and 'absolute' are key terms to describe Manzoni's practice – particularly in regards to the making of the *Lines* (1960) that I discuss in chapter four. In the modernist tradition Haroldo de Campos championed the employment of white in literature (also discussed in chapter four) and by Malevich in the arts. The refusal to acknowledge Malevich's influence on his

⁹³ Cf. Sergio Martins, "White on White on White: Oiticica/Malevich/Nietzsche," *Object*, 11 (2009): 65-85.

⁹⁴ Sérgio Martins, "White on white on white".

⁹⁵ Gonzalo Aguilar, *Hélio Oiticica: a asa branca do êxtase* (Rio de Janeiro: editor Rocco, 2016), 131.

work in the fifties is probably due to Oiticica's intention to distinguish his practice – and that of his fellow Neo-Concrete artists – from European modernism. The artist seeks to translate the Suprematist gesture into a Brazilian reality to avoid the risk of plagiarism and to solve the conflict between autonomy and imitation.

The reclamation of the anthropophagic cultural operation within the appropriation of Malevich's zero forms provides Oiticica with the foundations of his desired cultural zero of seemingly infinite possibilities of experimentation: pursuing a circular movement, the nothingness delivered by the *Série Branca* constitutes the impulse of a new beginning. Oiticica articulates this brand-new start firstly from a formal and empirical point of view by erasing from the canvas any superfluous content. Secondly, he pursues a zero ground of creation from a socio-political perspective through the invention and the performance of the *Parangolé* [fig. 2.17]. Indeed, a bi-dimensional artistic practice no longer fulfils the artist's will of creating collective situations. *Parangolé* capes, questioning the boundaries of aesthetic values system and being deeply rooted in the Brazilian tradition of the favelas and of samba, attack a social dimension that could not be possibly addressed by the employment of geometric abstract forms alone. Merging aesthetic and social dimensions, Oiticica fulfils the Brazilian aspiration of combining both a 'local' and vernacular character with an international 'avant-gardist' outlook. The tension shown in these works is similar to the tension enclosed by 'degree zero writing' theorised by Barthes. Beyond the apparent neutrality, according to Barthes the 'word' is at the same time essential but loaded with past and future significations. Similarly, Oiticica's *Parangolés* 'erase' modernist tradition by exploring a new genre – that of performance – and new media but retaining at the same time 'local' elements – Samba, for example. Therefore, I argue that Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes respond to a 'degree zero' aesthetics.

As claimed above, Oiticica states that *Parangolés* undermine the idea of the museum, implying a novel way to understand such an institution.⁹⁶ Here Malevich comes into play again. Oiticica's constructive method of rebuilding

⁹⁶ Sérgio Martins, "White on white on white".

forms and meanings of the work of art from scratch reciprocates the aforementioned radical act of painting white on white. The Brazilian artist devours Malevich's Suprematism in order to deliver an equally subversive art practice that deals with the engagement of the spectator and his or her body, while still looking for a compromise with local traditions. *Parangolé* capes demand to be physically completed by the audience and to be interpreted from the perspective of an external viewer.⁹⁷ Its nonconformist stance is established by challenging both the status of the work of art – rejecting the artistic genre's traditional labels – and the institution. Indeed, if the *Parangolé* turns into a work of art only with the audience's participation, how can it be exhibited? This permanent critical position enacted by the *Parangolé* is grounded in the notion of anti-art.

To understand how this criticism takes place, we must refer once again to the roots of Brazilian modernism, particularly to the novel *Marco Zero* (*Zero Point*, 1943) by Oswald de Andrade.⁹⁸ In 1964 – the year of the invention of the *Parangolé* – the Brazilian theorist Décio Pignatari wrote an interesting commentary on the language and the aesthetic program of de Andrade's book.⁹⁹ Pignatari describes de Andrade's creative process as based on chance and choice, and on collage and montage, and thus defined it as anti-literature that comes from zero. This original and creative procedure is closely tied to the establishment of both a new language that enables a simple and direct form of communication, and a critical meta-language more appropriate to analyse and comprehend it. Oiticica himself discusses Pignatari's commentary on de Andrade's novel, directly linking his practice to this approach and also advocating for a similar renovation project but in the field of the visual arts. According to Oiticica, the denial of the art of the past is driven by the search for a new way of acting that is free from any kind of social repression.

Oiticica's emphasis on the necessity of a novel behaviour constitutes a zero ground reached through the emancipation of the spectator – who shifts

⁹⁷ Anna Dezeuze, "Tactile Dematerialisation", 59. By 'intellectual' here I mean something closer to 'conceptual'.

⁹⁸ Oswald de Andrade, *Marco Zero* (Rio de Janeiro: J. Olympio, 1943).

from a passive to an active position – and through the revolutionary act of painting white on white. If Manzoni calls for the ‘achromasia’ of the canvas, Oiticica paints the latter with different shades of white. However, they both aimed to ‘zero’ those practices that had preceded them, overcoming the modernist understanding of monochromes (Manzoni) and absorbing and surpassing European avant-gardes (Oiticica). In Oiticica’s project, the intention to overcome the obsolescence of European modernist movements is ascribed not only to the artist but also to the participant.

Participation is made possible through the wearing of coloured capes, the *Parangolé*. This neologism derives from slang and identifies the fusion between work and folklore, thereby recalling the hybrid notion of tradition that features in Brazilian avant-garde.¹⁰⁰ Oiticica affirms that:

The word here assumes the same character as, for example, ‘Merz’ and its derivatives (‘Merzbau’, etc.) had for Schwitters. For him they were the definition of a specific experimental position, fundamental to the theoretical and existential comprehension of his entire work.¹⁰¹

In its revolutionary role, the *Parangolé* evolves *ex-nihilo* and epitomises a ‘glocal’ – fusing ‘local’ and ‘global’ – stance: it is a new kind of art work on a global scale because it anticipates the culture of participation in contemporary art practices, but it relies on Brazilian society and culture as well. In doing so, it makes the accomplishment of a degree zero art possible.

By chasing the constructive will of a cultural zero as a new form of beginning, Oiticica’s art practice challenges traditional aesthetic categories of modernism but endorses responsiveness to vernacular traditions – such as Samba dancing – and identities in order to create collective collaborations with the community living in the Mangueira shantytown.

⁹⁹ Decio Pignatari, *Marco Zero de Andrade*, 1964, URL <http://seer.fclar.unesp.br/alfa/article/viewFile/3230/2957>.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Like the word *Parangolé*, a slang term from Rio de Janeiro that refers to a range of events or states including idleness, a sudden agitation, an unexpected situation or a dance party, the more than thirty objects so titled by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica have an indeterminate status.’ Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialisation”, 59.

¹⁰¹ Hélio Oiticica, *Fundamental bases for the definition of the Parangolé*, in *Hélio Oiticica*, 85.

To conclude, Hélio Oiticica's pioneering notion of *anti-art* constituted a theoretical category forged by the artist to frame Brazilian neo-avant-garde practices. I have demonstrated the clash between Oiticica's *anti-artistic* position and what I call 'degree zero' aesthetics, a term which signifies an ambivalent constructive tendency, or a cultural emancipation from European artistic trends. This idea of zero works as 'mediator' among Brazilian cultural reality, enabling a compromise between the attitude of 'devouring' foreign models and the desire to create autochthonous art practices which still have an international appeal. The notion of 'zero' can be tracked back to the 1930s, featuring at various stages in Brazilian modernism including during the decades of Oiticica. Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes epitomise a 'zero point of creation'. Emerging from an anti-artistic stance stigmatised by a marginal position, both the idea and the work stem from a creative critical attitude alien to the institution; in effect, they make a *tabula rasa* of what has come before them.

Illustrations

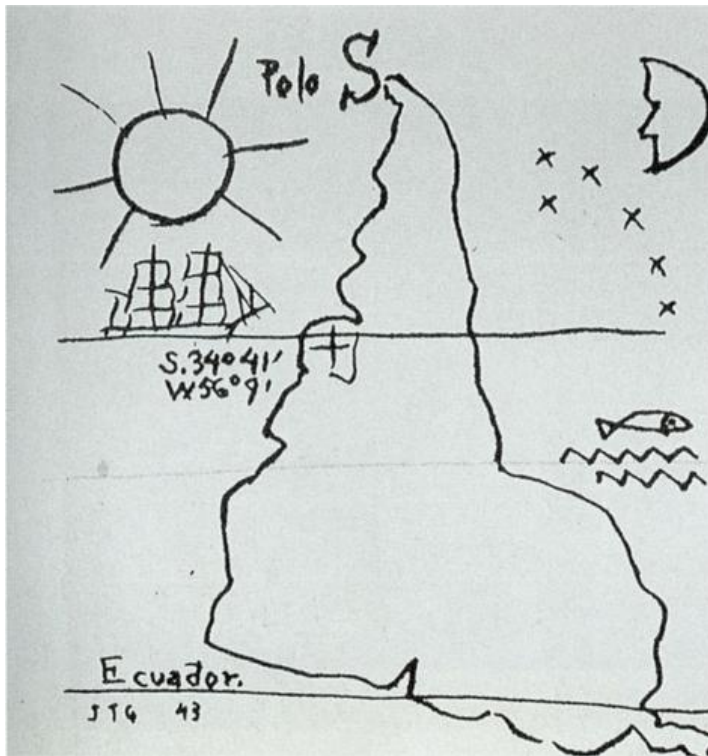


Fig. 2.1 Joaquín Torres García, *América invertida*, 1943, colour on paper, 22 x 16 cm. Foundation Joaquín Torres García.



Fig. 2.2 Cildo Mereiles, *Insertions into ideological circuits: Coca-cola Project*, 1970, three glass bottles, three metals caps, liquid and adhesive labels with text, each object 25 x 6 x 6 cm. Tate Collection.



Fig. 2.3 Cildo Meireles, *Zero Cruzeiro*, 1978, screen print on paper, 7 x 15 cm. ESCALA Collection.



Fig. 2.4 Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1967, mixed media.
Photo of the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1969,
reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. Courtesy of Whitechapel archive.



Fig. 2.5 Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1967, current re-staging at
Tate Gallery, London, curated by Tanya Barson.

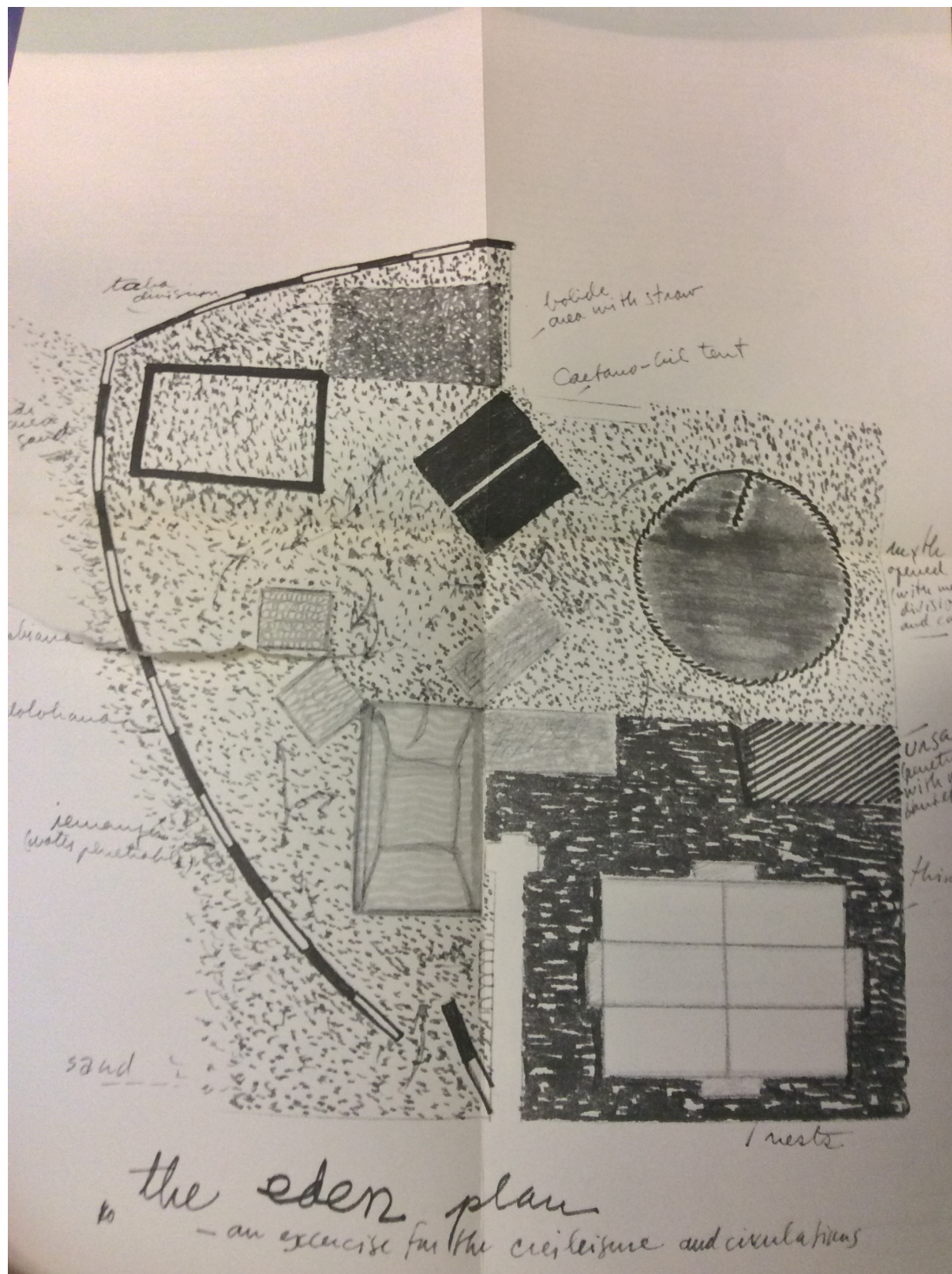


Fig. 2.6 Hélio Oiticica, *The Eden Plan*, 1969, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue of the Whitechapel exhibition in 1969. Courtesy of Whitechapel archive.



Fig. 2.7 *Tucumán Arde*, 1966-1968, Installation, Documents, photographs, press cuttings and other materials. MACBA Collection.

MANIFESTO ANTROPOFAGO

Só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente.

Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os collectivismo. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratados de paz.

Tupy, or not tupy that is the question.

Contra toda as catecheses. E contra a mãe dos Gracchos.

Só me interessa o que não é ineu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropofago.

Estamos fatigados de todos os maridos catholicos suspeitosos postos em drama. Freud acabou com o enigma mulher e com outros sustos da psychologia impressa.

O que atropelava a verdade era a roupa, o impermeavel entre o mundo interior e o mundo exterior. A reacção contra o homem vestido. O cinema americano informará.

Filhos do sol, mãe dos viventes. Encontrados e amados ferozmente, com toda a hypocrisia da saudade, pelos imigrados, pelos traficados e pelos turistas. No paiz da cobra grande.

Foi porque nunca tivemos grammaticas, nem collecções de velhos vegetaes. E nunca soubemos o que era urbano, suburbano, fronteiriço e continental. Preguiçosos no mappa mundi do Brasil.

Uma consciencia participante, uma rythmica religiosa.

Contra todos os importadores de consciencia enlatada. A existencia palpavel da vida. E a mentalidade prelogica para o Sr. Levy Bruhl estudar.

Queremos a revolução Carahiba. Maior que a revolução Francesa. A unificação de todas as revoltas eficazes na direcção do homem. Sem nós a Europa não teria sequer a sua

pobre declaração dos direitos do homem.

A idade de ouro anunciada pela America. A idade de ouro. E todas as girls.

Filiação. O contacto com o Brasil Carahiba. *Oú Villeganhon print terre.* Montaigne. O homem natural. Rousseau. Da Revolução Francesa ao Romantismo, á Revolução Bolchevista, á Revolução surrealista e ao barbaro technizado de Keyserling. Caminhamos.

Nunca fomos catechizados. Vivemos através de um direito sonambulo. Fizemos Christo nascer na Bahia. Ou em Belem do Pará.

Mas nunca admittimos o nascimento da logica entre nós.

Só podemos attender ao mundo arecular.

Tinhamos a justiça codificação da vingança. A sciencia codificação da Magia. Antropofagia. A transformação permanente do Tabú em totem.

Contra o mundo reversível e as idéas objectivadas. Cadaverizadas. O stop do pensamento que é dinamico. O individuo victima do systema. Fonte das injustiças classicas. Das injustiças romanticas. E o esquecimento das conquistas interiores.

Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros.

O instinto Carahiba.

Morte e vida das hypotheses. Da equação eu parte do Kosmos ao axioma Kosmos parte do eu. Subsistencia. Conhecimento. Antropofagia.

Contra as elites vegetaes. Em comunicação com o sólo.

Nunca fomos catechizados. Fizemos foi Carnaval. O indio vestido de senador do Imperio. Fingindo de Pitt. Ou figurando nas operas de Alencar cheio de bons sentimentos portuguezes.

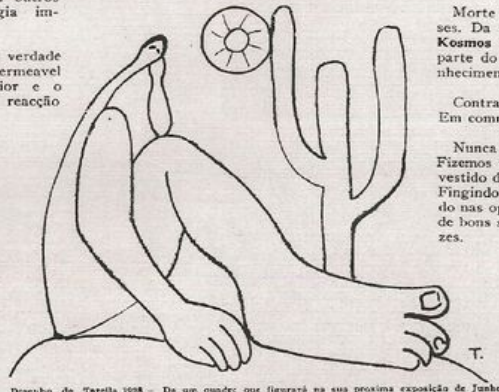
Já tínhamos o communismo. Já tínhamos a lingua surrealista. A idade de ouro. Catiti Catiti Imara Notiá Notiá Imara Ipejú

A magia e a vida. Tinhamos a relação e a distribuição dos bens phisicos, dos bens moraes, dos bens dignarios. E sabiamos transpor o mysterio e a morte com o auxilio de algumas formas grammaticaes.

Perguntei a um homem o que era o Direito. Elle me respondeu que era a garantia do exercicio da possibilidade. Esse homem chamava-se Galli Mathias. Comi-o

Só não ha determinismo - onde ha misterio. Mas que temos nós com isso?

Continua na Pagina 7



Desenho de Tarella 1928 - De um quadro que figurará na sua proxima exposiçao de Junho na galeria Perrier, em Paris.

Contra o Padre Vieira. Autor do nosso primeiro emprestimo, para ganhar comissao. O rei analphabeto dissera-lhe: ponha isso no papel mas sem muita labia. Fez-se o emprestimo. Gravou-se o assucar brasileiro. Vieira deixou o dinheiro em Portugal e nos trouxe a labia,

O espirito recusa-se a conceber o espirito sem corpo. O antropomorfismo. Necessidade da vaccina antropofagica. Para o equilibrio contra as religiões de meridiano. E as inquisições exteriores.

Fig. 2.8 Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropofago," *Revista de Antropofagia* 1, 1928, 3.

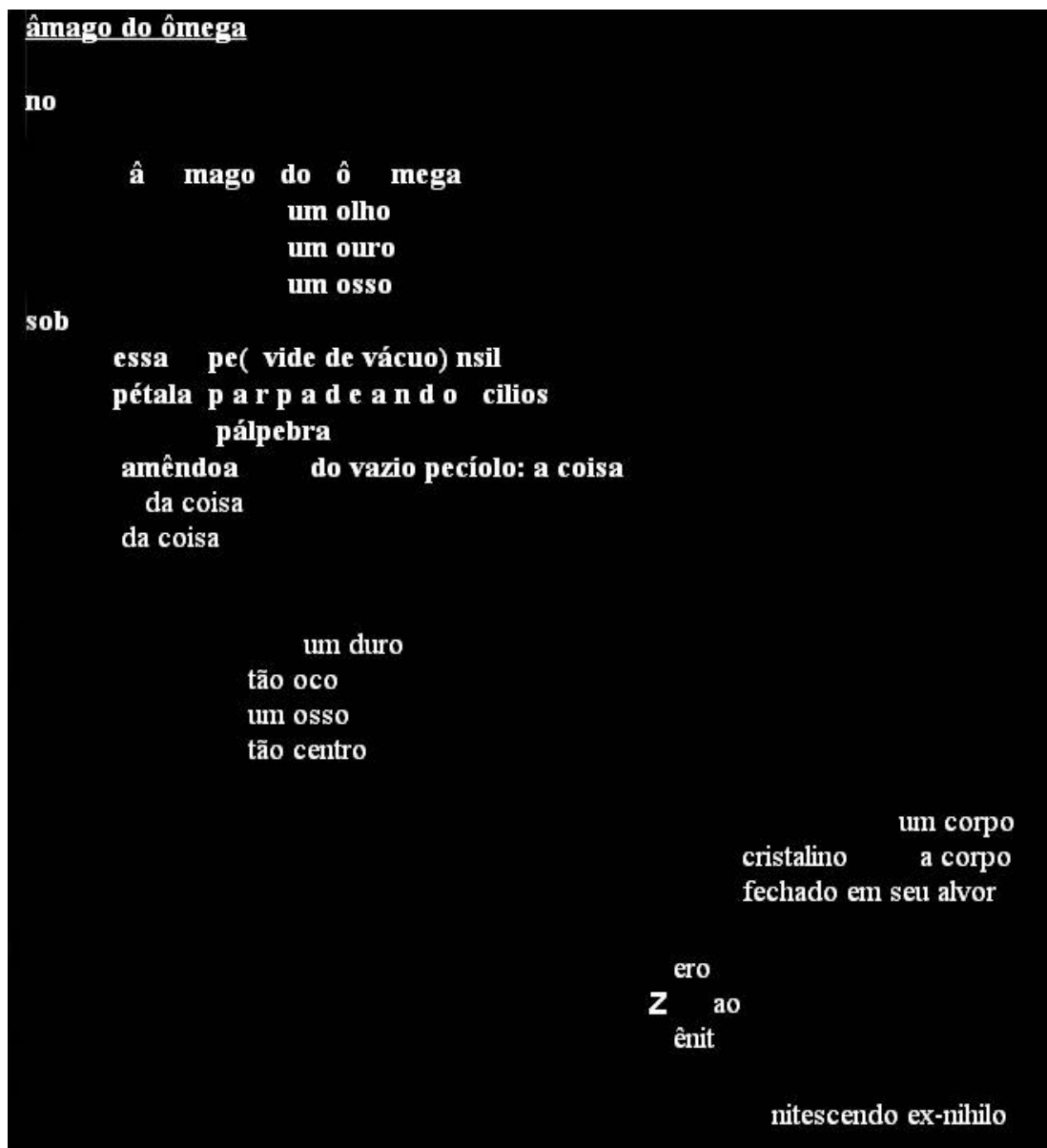


Fig. 2.9 Haroldo de Campos, "O âmagô do Ômega," 1956, reproduced in *Os melhores poemas de Haroldo de Campos* (São Paulo: Global, 1992), 44.



Fig. 2.10 Lygia Clark, *Hand Dialogue*, 1966.
Photo courtesy of Museum of Modern Art,
Rio de Janeiro.



Fig. 2.11 Hélio Oiticica & Antonio Manuel, *Nirvana*, 1968, mixed media, photo taken at the exhibition 'Hélio Oiticica: Barração', 02 September-05 November 2016, Nara Rosler Gallery, São Paulo.

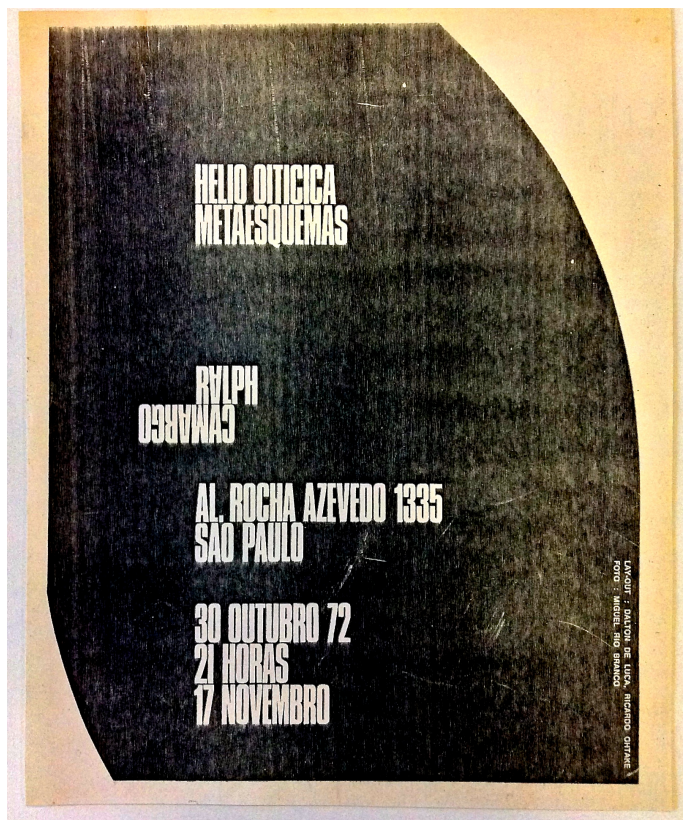


Fig. 2.12 flyer of the exhibition 'Oitica: Metaesquemas', 30 october- 17 November 1972, Ralph Camargo Gallery, São Paulo, Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro.

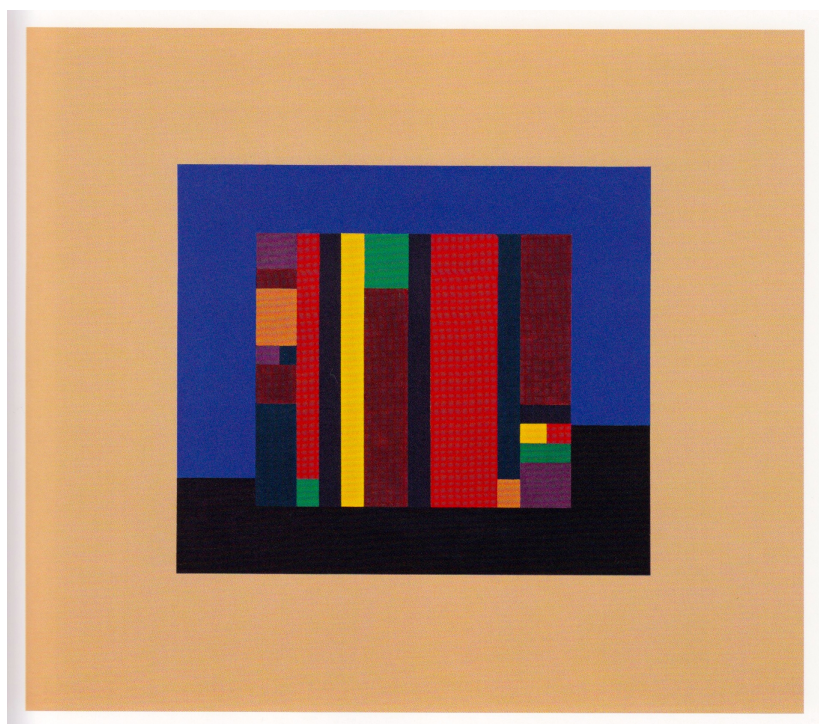


Fig. 2.13 Hélio Oiticica, *Grupo Frente*, 1955, guache on paper, 49.9 x 57.9 cm. Private collection.

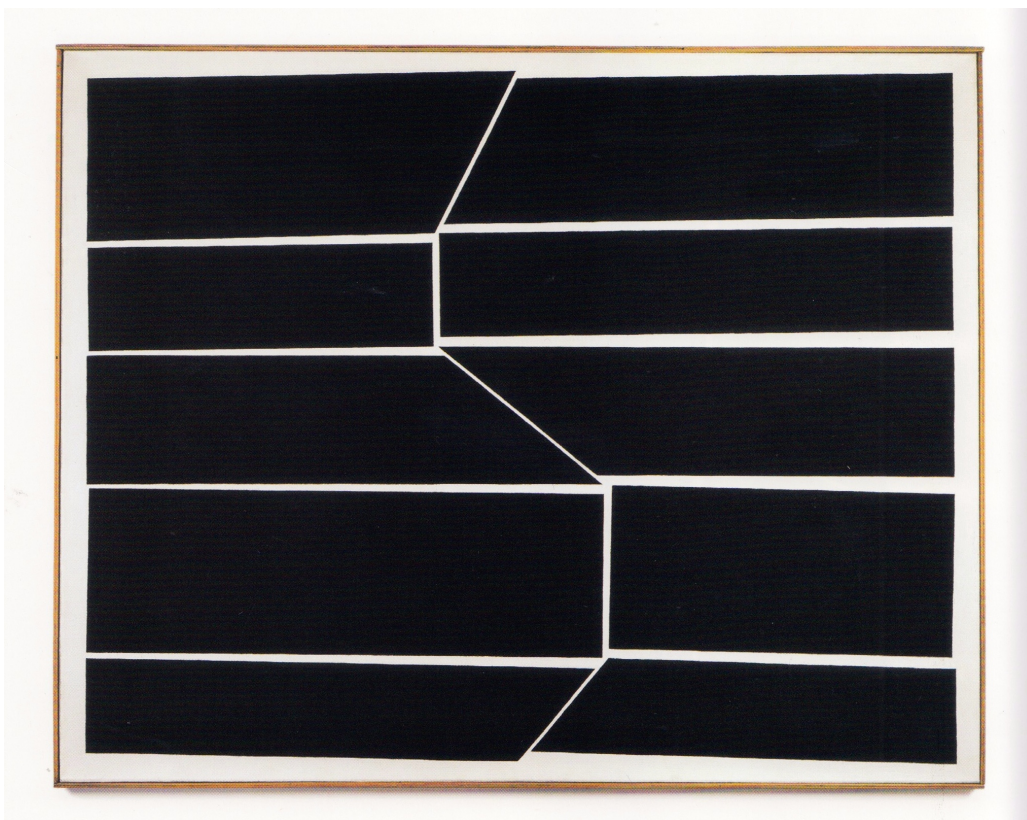


Fig. 2.14 Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema*, 1958, oil on canvas, 88.6 x 113 cm. Private collection.

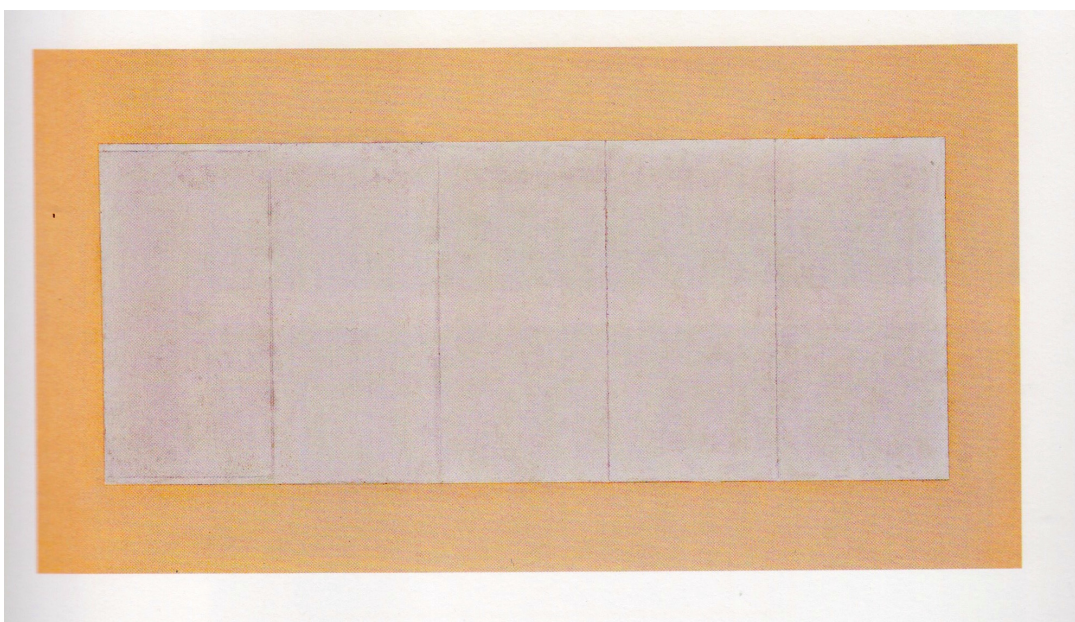


Fig. 2.15 Hélio Oiticica, *Pintura Branca (White Painting)*, 1959, guache on paper, 22.8 x 43.5 cm. Private collection.

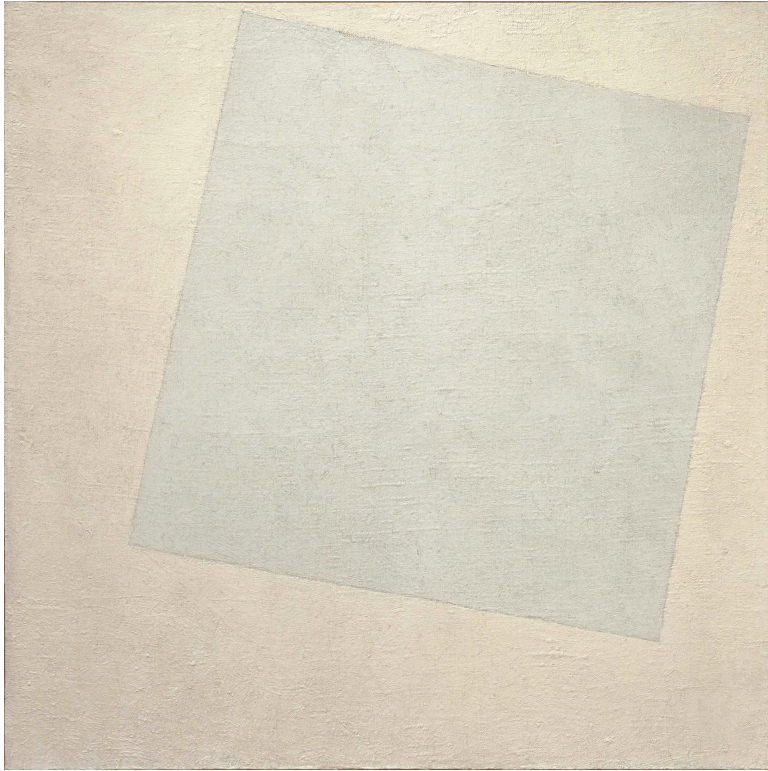


Fig. 2.16 Kazimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 79.4 x 79.4. MoMA Collection.



Fig. 2.17 Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé capa 6* (wore by Mosquito) and *B17 Glass Bólide* (Homage to Mondrian), 1965. Photo by César Oiticica.

Part I Conclusion

Oiticica's practice, notably the shift from painting to performance, echoed years of political and social unrest in Brazil. Oiticica started making the *Parangolé* capes in 1964, thus coinciding with the advent of the dictatorship. In contrast to the increasing atmosphere of repression, *Parangolé* calls for a greater degree of freedom. 'Freedom' in relation to the *Parangolé* could be analysed along different registers: like sculptures on the move, *Parangolé* capes free themselves from a bi-dimensional state, which follows a progression similar to the one that affects Manzoni's project.¹⁰² Moreover, with the *Parangolé*, Oiticica frees the artist from his or her original role and decreases his or her power of intervention. Concurrently, he frees the audience from a subaltern position, prompting a novel understanding of the work of art and its definition and therefore symbolising a 'zero' point of creation. As I have demonstrated, *Parangolé* evolves from earlier series of works, the Grupo Frente paintings, the *Metaesquemas* and the *Série Branca*; each series demonstrates the influence of modernist artists Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich. Equally, the *Achromes* emerge from other series of works, namely the *Imprints*, the Jungian paintings and *Catrami* (Matterist paintings), zeroing symbolic and informal elements that previously had characterised Manzoni's oeuvre in order to suggest a new 'anti-aesthetic' reappraisal of the work of art.

Not only does *Parangolé* come from a recognisable art-historical lineage enacting a shift from the flat plane to the three-dimensional space, but it also responds to the rhetoric of 'liberty' that is indicative of pivotal changes across Oiticica's contemporary politics and society. In doing so – that is to say, in emphasising the necessity of a greater freedom concerning the understanding of a work of art – *Parangolé* indicates the growing lack of freedom in society that was caused by the coming-to-power of the military dictatorship.

¹⁰² Manzoni's appraisal of the ideal of freedom will be developed in chapter 4.

Manzoni's *Achromes* adhere to a similar rhetoric: rejecting any mimetic intent, they free the surface of the canvas from any kind of representation or from the expression of symbolic values. However, Manzoni never abandoned painting as the privileged medium as he continued to work on new prototypes of *Achromes* until the very end of his career. Concurrently he went on to develop works that display a more performative and 'conceptual' dimension.

To conclude, part I of this thesis has analysed Manzoni's *Achromes* and Oiticica's Parangolé capes as 'zero' works of art by developing their relationship with previous series of works as well as by explaining the meaning of a degree zero aesthetics. At the same time both chapters have aimed to re-evaluate the critical literature on these works. Concerning Manzoni, I have attempted to demonstrate how Briony Fer's and Jaleh Mansoor's acknowledgment of the *Achromes* present several problematic aspects; similarly, with regard Oiticica and Latin American art, I have discussed some of the more controversial issues, such as the notions of hybridity and heterogeneity, and in particular Mari Carmen Ramírez's constellar model of interpretation. In the next part of this thesis I am going to investigate recent sites of discourse, particularly participation and politics, in order to historiographically reappraise the understanding of them through the lens of Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice.

Part II

Introduction

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the idea of ‘zero’ as applied to Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s practice. In the first chapter I have not only described Manzoni’s *Achromes* in light of a degree zero aesthetics but tracked their origins by considering Manzoni’s earlier works and their relationship with the Nuclear art movement. In the second chapter I analysed closely the Brazilian cultural context and Oiticica’s *Parangolé*. Part II of this thesis critically readdresses important sites of discourse, namely participation and politics. In the third chapter I rework the idea of participation as proposed by much contemporary literature; I shall compare and contrast narratives proposed by Claire Bishop, Grant H. Kester and Nicola Bourriaud, opting for Umberto Eco’s idea of ‘open work’ as the preferred model of interpretation. In the fourth chapter I propose a different perspective on the notion of politics itself. I will discuss the idea of social and aesthetic marginality in Oiticica’s theory and practice and explore the notions of freedom in Manzoni, problematising the production of multiples in his work.

As pointed out in previous chapters, the series of the *Achromes* constitutes a turning point in Manzoni’s project and reflects pivotal changes across the political, the social and the economic landscape of Italy at the end of the fifties. Oiticica’s *Parangolé* capes constitute a similar milestone within Brazil’s artistic and socio-political landscape. To better contextualise the narratives informing part II of this thesis, I am going to briefly address major issues that have characterised both the Italian and Brazilian social scene during the post-war period.

Between the fifties and the sixties Italy witnessed incredible growth. This period of social and economic revolution, subsequently named ‘the Italian Miracle’, reached its climax between 1958 and 1963. In more or less twenty years, between 1950 and 1970, the gross domestic product became three times higher than it had been before. Several interpretations and theoretical approaches have been used to explain this phenomenon. The main causes of such a huge increase of production could be summarised as follows: the low

cost of manpower, the development of policies and institutions in favour of the 'mezzogiorno' (the south), the growth of the state industry, the end of a policy of autocracy and the subsequent openness of the markets to international trades and lastly the growing immigration from rural regions to industrialised towns.¹ As Paul Ginsborg affirms, 'Italy ceased to be a peasant country and became one of the major industrial nations of the west'.² Certainly, this would have never been possible without the help provided by the Marshall Plan in the aftermath of the war that set Italy's development in line with American consumerism.

However, despite US economic intervention in the Italian economy, the cultural sector always remained Europe-orientated. Notably, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg and fellow North American artists had a certain impact on Italian post-war visual arts but the most important role was played by closer countries, leading to a pan-European web of encounters and mutual exchanges. Nonetheless, the socio-political situation saw a considerable intervention by the US even with regard to military issues establishing missile bases on Italian soil.

During the years of political turmoil, Italy was ruled by the Christian Democrats who were constantly challenged by the Communist Party. The occurrences and events of this decade laid the foundations for the terrorism of the 'Years of Lead' in the seventies. Richard Drake argues that current criticism of Italian history has overlooked the impact that the sixties had on the emergence of terrorism. Notably, he criticises historian Arthur Marwick for having treated Italian terrorism 'as a regrettable and relatively small shadow on an/the otherwise sunny sixties landscape' by arguing that 'In a 1984 national poll, Italians were asked to name the historical development of the last fifty years to which future historians of Italy would devote the most attention. Of

¹ See Lociano Boggio, "From semi-industrialised economy to sixth industrial power", *Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali*, 103 (1995) 228-229, 231, accessed August 22, 2016, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41623880>.

² Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), 212.

those polled, over 36 per cent chose terrorism'.³ Richard Drake affirms that the terrorism of the 'Years of Lead' saw its sources in the left-wing groups 'Lotta Continua' and 'Potere Operaio' and in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Drake, the Red Brigades were fascinated by 'utopian communist expectations' as developed by Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).⁴ Although the influence that Sartre had on Manzoni had nothing to do with left-wing ideas, I shall explore the importance of Sartre for Manzoni in chapter four.

Another reality characterised Italy during those years – acting as counter narrative in respect to the 'Economic Miracle'. This is the image of Italy as a still-rural country. While the outskirts of cities under construction progressively colonised the surrounding countryside, the two worlds remained separate. The daily life of the working class was the subject that mattered to Neo-Realist filmmakers: *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), directed by Vittorio De Sica, provides a perfect snapshot of the immediate post-war situation in Rome, affected by higher rates of unemployment, micro-criminality and an absent judiciary system. Fifteen years later, the working class was still the subject of some of the poet, writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini's movies from the early sixties. The short-movie *La Ricotta* (*Curd Cheese*, 1963) opens with the *tableau vivant* of Rosso Fiorentino's deposition of 1521 [fig. 3.1] set in an open rural plain on the edge of Rome, thus establishing a poetic link with the Italian Renaissance tradition. The meta-movie narrates the production of the *Passion of Jesus* with a Pasolini-like director played by Orson Wells; it is however focused on the brief sequence of events that affects 'Stracci' ('Rags', a nickname), an extra playing the role of the 'crucified'. His desperate hunger pushes him to steal a huge amount of curd cheese that he eats voraciously while the rest of the cast laughs, looking at him hiding in a cave. The unfortunate combination between the amount of food eaten and the position in which he is 'crucified' causes him to die of indigestion. In between the tragic and the satirical, Pasolini emphasises the gap

³ Richard Drake, "Italy in the 1960s: a legacy of terrorism and Liberation", *South Central Review*, 16/17 (1999-2000), 62, 64. Accessed August 27, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3190077>.

⁴ R. Drake, "Italy in the 1960s", 69.

between the marginalised working classes and the newly-born society of the spectacle, thereby encapsulating the ambiguity that distinguishes this decade and providing a counter-narrative to the economic miracle. The legacy of the ‘attention to the rural’ undertaken by Pasolini would be continued by Arte Povera artists at the turn of the seventies, reiterating the play between innovation and tradition by employing ‘poor’ means.

Equally, the fifties in Brazil witnessed pivotal changes: a considerable economic growth was preceded by years of political turmoil. Shortly after World War II, Brazil adopted a US oriented policy and a capitalist market, coinciding with the end of the *Era Vargas* in 1945.⁵ Despite the opposition that Brazilian intelligentsia exercised towards the ‘Estado Nôvo’, Vargas’ regime indirectly consolidated modern art: the intellectual élite gathered together and ‘turned the “Getulismo” (the years of Getulio Vargas) into a major creative impulse of literature in Brazil’.⁶ In the following presidential elections, Getulio Vargas’ former war minister Eurico Gaspar Dutra won the elections supported by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and established the fifth constitution of Brazil that was officially approved in 1946, the same year in which Italy became a Republic. Dutra’s politics was mainly based on neo-liberalism, a joint cooperation with the US, and the presence of foreign investments. He therefore met with opposition from the communist party that was becoming increasingly popular, especially amongst younger generations.

Consequently, Dutra found a legal way to declare the communist party illegal and banished it from the political scene. Vargas, a former dictator, took advantage of the situation by re-mobilising the labour party (Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro) and by presenting himself as a demagogic defender of the masses. He was successfully re-elected in 1950 with the support of the PTB and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Nonetheless, he acquired the favour of both the old oligarchies and the self-made men who were representing the working and lower middle classes. On 24 August 1954, Vargas, charged with

⁵ ‘Era Vargas’ is the name given to the years ruled by president Getulio Vargas (1930-1945). The period is divided in three important periods: Governo Provisório (temporary government) 1930-1934; Governo Constitucional (constitutional government) 1934-1937; Estado Novo (New State) 1937-1945.

⁶ Cassiano Nunes, “The Characteristics of Modern Poetry in Brazil”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 1 (1968), 21.

the homicide of Major Rubens Vaz, committed suicide. The presidency was taken by Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) whose slogan became ‘fifty years of progress in five’. The programme witnessed rapid economic growth, mainly due to the large influx of foreign capital that in turn reinforced domestic industries. During these years the ultra-modern capital Brasilia was built (in forty-one months from 1956 to 1961): a symbol of prosperity and optimism for the future. Italy, witnessing an extraordinary economic boom, shared with Brazil an equal enthusiasm for the years yet to come.

The promise of optimism in the late fifties was not fulfilled in the following decade; the sixties in Brazil again saw years of political turmoil and the advent of the military dictatorship in 1964. The regime prompted social upheaval, affecting workers, artists and activists, especially from 1968 onwards. That same year saw other emblematic events: factory workers in São Paulo and Minas Gerais went on strike for the first time since the advent of the dictatorship, and groups of activists gathered together under cover and initiated an armed fight. Consequently the government promulgated the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) that banned any form of political opposition and ratified censorship over the press (1968). Many artists, including Oiticica, went into exile. However, during those years Brazil developed an extraordinary counter-cultural movement, epitomised by *Tropicália*, an umbrella-name that encompassed different artistic manifestations in several fields, particularly in music. In this respect, in chapter four, I will develop the ambivalent relationship between Oiticica and the issue of ‘marginality’, which was a *leitmotiv* of Brazilian art and culture at the end of the sixties.

Chapter 3

‘Open’ participation?

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss and problematise participatory practice in the work of both Hélio Oiticica and Piero Manzoni. As Claire Bishop contends in her seminal book *Artificial Hells* on participation:

The clash between the artistic and the social critiques recurs most visibly at certain historical moments (...) the appearance of participatory art is symptomatic of this clash and tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval.¹

The invention of new participatory practices is crucial to the art of both artists: the novel engagement with the public enacted by their work reflects the will to ‘sublate’ the past to start from nothing, from ‘zero’, a Hegelian dialectic already emphasised in previous chapters. Also, the dismantling of the barriers between author and spectator envisaged in much of the literature of the period reciprocates political and economic changes occurring in Italy and Brazil at the beginning of the sixties. Yet, as I will demonstrate, Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s relationship with the audience is embedded in diverse theoretical approaches and takes place according to almost contrasting models. Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* will be used as a literary source to untwist these dichotomies. Published in Italy in 1962 and in Brazil in 1968, this book has played a pivotal role in shaping criticism on participation, intellectualising a hermeneutical model that frames a new understanding of the art object. From both an aesthetic and historical perspective, the analysis and use of Eco’s idea of openness enables me to trace a new path around so-called ‘participatory art’.

This chapter is organised in three sections. Section one addresses the literary history of participation, particularly concentrating on contemporary debates inflamed by art historians and critics Claire Bishop, Grant H. Kester and

¹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York, Verso, 2012), 276.

Nicolas Bourriaud. In the second section I challenge the controversial reception of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* in Brazil, focusing on the writings of Haroldo de Campos, Ferreira Gullar and Hélio Oiticica. The last part applies Eco's aesthetic paradigm to discuss Oiticica's and Manzoni's work. I consider Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes (from 1964) and Piero Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* and *Magic Bases* (both 1961). My goal is to demonstrate how the two artists – consciously or unconsciously influenced by the same theory – engender different strategies when dealing with the spectator. The juxtaposition of their works produces pairs of contraries: dance versus stillness, empathy versus alienation and collective versus individuality. These series of opposition are symptomatic of the two antagonistic ways in which the presence of the audience affects their practice, jeopardising the artists' original intent. Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes risk to fetishize the minority of the black *favelados* performing in front of the white bourgeoisie. Similarly, Manzoni's *Living Sculptures* are hunted by the spectre of the 'spectacle'; they make a spectacle of the human body reified in the role of the standing statue. Therefore in this chapter I am going to unfold and illustrate these paradoxes, analysed through the lens of Eco's semiological book 'The Open Work'.

1. Theoretical frame: the literature on participatory art

In recent years, scholarly attention on the inclusion of the audience in the artistic realm has significantly increased. It emerged through exhaustive debates on the merging between the 'aesthetic' and the 'social', which have scrutinised participatory practices as the condition for the foundation of a 'truly democratic art'.² The assumption of the existence of a 'good art' whose objective is to 'ameliorate' current society is imbued with both Christian sensibility and a Marxist legacy, and draws its origins from the writings of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1882-1940) in the early 1930s. Indeed, as argued by Claire Bishop, reflecting on the notions of 'reader' and 'author',

² Frank Popper, *Art-Action, Participation* (New York: New York University Press, 1975) 12, quoted in Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 79.

Benjamin pioneered the genesis of ‘political participation’ in contemporary arts.³

Benjamin considers that the newspaper is exemplary in this respect for it allows the reader to ‘activate’ his or her status to become a ‘collaborator’. This shift occurs when the ‘all-consuming’ impatience of the reader is ‘exploited by publishers’ in creating new spaces that make the audience visible – spaces where the reader’s questions, opinions and protests can be addressed and interests expressed.⁴ Benjamin then concludes:

Hand in hand, therefore, with the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes the equally indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who are instantly elevated to collaborators. (...) The conventional distinction between author and public that the press has maintained is disappearing in a socially desirable way. The reader is at all times ready to become a writer – that is a describer or even a prescriber. As an expert – not perhaps in a discipline, but perhaps in a post he holds – he gains access to authorship.⁵

Blurring the boundaries between author and reader, and dissolving the notion of the reader as a passive, subjected agent, Benjamin unfolds pivotal issues concerning the ‘open’ character of contemporary art works and media thirty years earlier than Umberto Eco.

Benjamin pushes the argument even further, considering ‘the function of the work within the literary relations of production of its time’ and advocating the end of the autonomy of the author as necessary for him to intervene in the class struggle on the side of the proletariat.⁶ According to Benjamin, this ‘operative’ writer can choose his intellectual place ‘only on the basis of the process of production’.⁷ The work of art should therefore offer the audience the ‘model’ to enable its emancipation:

³ Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,’ *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 78.

⁴ Recalling Benjamin’s praise of the newspaper in emancipating the audience condition, Bishop highlights its fictitious quality: ‘Even so, the newspaper retains an editor, and the letters page is but one among many other authored pages beneath the remit of this editor.’ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 78.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Newspaper,’ in *Selected Writings Vol. 2 (1927-1934)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 741; see also “The Author as Producer,” *New Left Review* 1/62 (1970);

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.⁸

According to Benjamin, an exemplary model of this apparatus is Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre: by disrupting the unity of the sequences in a play – thus adopting a fragmented montage – Brecht makes the audience aware of the means of production and the actors of their role.

In respect to the literature on participation, Benjamin is significant for several reasons: not only for enhancing the importance of the audience and for changing the structure of the work, prefiguring its 'openness', but also for dictating the necessity of a political judgement for both the work of art and the artist with regard to the Marxist emphasis on class struggle. Similarly to the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectual', this theoretical frame becomes – as I will explain further – relevant to the 'ethical' attitude apparent in Ferreira Gullar's writings, which bridges the gap between Eco's aesthetics and Marxist theories.

1.1 The 'ethical turn' and its discontents

Among more recent criticism on participatory art, Bishop holds a preeminent place.⁹ However, it is not my intention here to slavishly embrace her model, but rather to retain from her analysis elements useful to my thesis. I have deliberately taken on Bishop for several reasons. In the first instance, for her challenging of both Kester and Bourriaud; secondly for her (mis)use of Eco's model of the 'open work', elected in Bishop's narration as a 'metre of judgement' of some post-communist collective art practice – namely the experiments of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, Thomas Hirschhorn and

⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 777.

⁹ Three texts interplays in my discussion: "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004); *Participation, Documents of Contemporary art* (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press) 2006; *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

Santiago Sierra. Bishop also retraces the genealogy of participatory practices from the beginning of the twentieth century on, creating a global map of interconnected links that provides a useful framework in which to relocate Manzoni's and Oiticica's oeuvre. To be fully understood, Bishop's argument needs to be contextualised in a much broader panorama on participation; in this respect Kester's dialogical aesthetics deserves to be acknowledged.

Kester derives the notion of dialogical art practice from the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) who envisages the work of art 'as a kind of conversation – a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view'.¹⁰ Conceived no longer as an object of contemplation but as a place of 'performative interaction', the work of art contributes to a process of redefinition of the aesthetic experience in terms of duration.¹¹ Kester sees the rise of conceptualism between the 1960s and 1970s as resulting in the production of works of art that require or depend on the physical involvement of the viewer: 'The viewer is called upon to participate in, move around, interact with and literally complete the work of art in a myriad of ways. (...) This interactive orientation implies in turn, an art experience that extends over time.'¹² Here Kester is drawing upon Eco's notion of the 'open work': only the spectator's interaction validates the 'completeness' of a work of art that in turn remains fundamentally open, to be experienced an infinite number of times. What matters in Kester's narrative is the distinction he draws among these conceptual art practices between 'those projects that are developed as *a priori* constructs or events, independent of the viewer's presence and those that are dependent on some form of viewers interaction'.¹³ This differentiation will later serve my argument on Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice.

Kester's dialogical aesthetics is successful in undermining the idea of a universal and objective foundation of a work of art, insisting on the opposite notions of discourse and inter-subjective exchange, according to which

¹⁰ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10

¹¹ The rejection of the work of art as a mere object of contemplation is a characteristic envisaged already in the Baroque spirituality, as Eco sustains in the *Open Work*, 7.

¹² Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 53.

¹³ Ibid.

subjectivity is itself modelled through this reciprocal communication. Both the artist and the work are defined in open-ended terms, closer to the notion of ‘ambiguity’ apparent in Eco’s aesthetics. What is debatable is the resulting utopic creation of ‘empathetic axes’:

Dialogical works can challenge dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of and empathy for that community among a broader public. [...] Empathetic identification (between artists and their collaborators and among the collaborators themselves) is a necessary component of dialogical practice. It facilitates a reciprocal exchange that allows us to think outside our own lived experience and establish a more compassionate relationship with others.¹⁴

This ‘ethical’ approach is criticised by Bishop who accuses both Kester, and the critic and curator Bourriaud, of acknowledging participatory art solely as the place of redemption from capitalism to the detriment of its artistic quality.¹⁵ She labels them as ‘activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market’.¹⁶ She therefore argues:

In the absence of a commitment to the aesthetic, Kester’s position adds up to a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and an inflexible mode of political correctness.¹⁷

Bishop directs similar criticism towards Bourriaud who, she argues, understands the work of art as a ‘social form capable of producing positive human relationships’, thus implying a detachment between aesthetical, political and ethical judgement.¹⁸ The artists Bourriaud supports are, according to Bishop, less interested in human relations than in relations concerning time, place and so forth, therefore blaming the art critic of ‘aestheticising relations.’¹⁹

¹⁴ Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 115, 150.

¹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

¹⁶ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn, Collaboration and its discontents,” *Artforum*, (2006): 180

¹⁷ Bishop, “The Social Turn,” 180

¹⁸ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 62.

¹⁹ Bishop, “The Social Turn”.

Bishop's major complaint is that socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism and it's now judged on ethical parameters.

While I will not dwell on this now well-established argument, for my purposes it is important to emphasise Bishop's final resolution to untangle the knot between the spheres of the aesthetic and the political and the social by discussing philosopher and theorist Jacques Rancière (1940 -). Rancière reflects upon this issue by quoting Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) judgment on Juno Ludovisi (reported in Schiller's fifteenth letter on *The Aesthetic Education of Man*, 1794). Schiller's evaluation of the statue is based upon its collective availability that makes it an example – and a promise, adds Bishop – of a new community 'that suspends reason and power in a state of inequality.'²⁰ The aesthetic is therefore grounded on and comprehends the sphere of the political, since 'aesthetics and politics overlap in their concern for the distribution and sharing of the sensible world'; 'in this framework it is not possible to conceive of an aesthetic judgment that is not also at the same time a political judgment.'²¹ Bishop concludes as follow:

The aesthetic is, according to Rancière, the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.²²

This allows me to formulate two assumptions necessary to comprehend Manzoni's and Oiticica's participatory works. The first consists in the coexistence of social critique and aesthetic judgement, as demonstrated by Bishop. The second comprises the conceptualisation of an 'open' aesthetics – a *leitmotiv* concealed in both Bourriaud's and Kester's narratives, and made evident in Bishop's text.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Bishop, "The Social Turn."

²² Bishop, "The Social Turn," 183

It is particularly this second postulate that informs my thesis. In the following section I demonstrate Eco's presence in the Brazilian cultural scene of the 1960s, articulating his role in paving the way to participatory practice. I then take a step further and adopt Eco's model to analyse both Manzoni's and Oiticica's novel conception of the work of art.

1.2 On the reception of Umberto Eco's 'The Open Work' in Brazil

The post note of Haroldo de Campos' 'The Open Work' – published originally in *Diário de São Paulo*, March 7, 1955 and first translated in English by Hon Tolman in 1981²³ – reads:

Umberto Eco, in his preface to the Brazilian edition of his work *Opera aperta*, said the following in reference to this essay: 'It is indeed a curious thing that a few years before I wrote *Opera aperta*, Haroldo de Campos, in one of his articles, anticipates its themes in a surprising way, as if he had reviewed the book I had not yet written and I would later write without having read his articles. But this meant that certain problems emerge in an urgent way at given historical moments, arising almost automatically from the research in progress.'²⁴

Despite what Eco affirmed, the similarities between the two texts are quite striking. It seems strange that he had not read Haroldo in the years between 1955 and 1962, when his *Open Work* was firstly published. However, it is not my intention here to establish a competition between the two poets; my aim is rather to highlight common features and controversial attitudes in the reception of *The Open Work* among the Brazilian intellectual élite during the sixties. For this purpose, I pay special attention to the work of Oiticica, for whom the concept of 'openness' became fundamental.

²³ Appeared in "Dispositio" 6, (Summer-Fall 1981). This is not the only text in which Haroldo discusses his understanding of the open work. See Haroldo de Campos, *A arte no horizonte do provável e outros ensaios* (Rio de Janeiro: Perspectiva, 1975), 15-32.

²⁴ Umberto Eco, *Obra aberta* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1968) 17, quoted in Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros, eds., *Novas, Selected Writings of Haroldo de Campos* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 369.

The most noticeable difference between Eco's and Haroldo's texts is that the latter amounts to only three pages.²⁵ It thus does not provide a programmatic theory, but rather an overview of the 'porosity' of the works of some European writers. This almost justifies the fact that its reception was limited, for it did not go beyond the national borders of Brazil before at least a decade had passed. On the contrary, Eco's book became very popular and internationally influential after its French publication in 1965, which according to the author himself was 'more definite and more complete than the Italian edition'.²⁶ Eco's *Open Work* discusses the problems concerning openness and ambiguity of contemporary works of art; it does not define 'openness' as a critical category but rather as an interpretative model. Eco structures an exegetical system, able to reveal the pluri-isotopic nature of a work.

If we consider the two writings side by side, one almost works as the introductory essay of the other. In *Obra aberta*, the Brazilian writer mentions the works of Modernist writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, Edward Estlin Cummings and James Joyce as examples of texts that subvert the notion of 'linear development'. Particularly, in regards to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), Haroldo emphasises its capillary structure by referring to 'silence' as defined by Pierre Boulez in the field of music.²⁷ According to Haroldo, Mallarmé 'uses silence in the same way Alexander Calder used air'.²⁸ With respect to Joyce, Haroldo stresses his atomisation of language in the evolution from a straight to an anarchic progression of space-time. Analysing *Finnegan's Wake*, he parallels its structure with a circle of recurring elements, defining all its points as equidistant from the centre and thus affirming that 'the work is porous to the reader, accessible from any place one chooses to approach it'.²⁹ In the final part of his text, Haroldo invokes once again Pierre

²⁵ I will refer from now on to Haroldo de Campos by his first name in order not to confound him with his brother and fellow Concrete poet Augusto.

²⁶ Umberto Eco, quoted in Guy De Mallac, "The poetics of the Open Form (Umberto Eco's Notion of 'Opera Aperta')," *Books Abroad* 45 (Winter, 1971): 36.

²⁷ 'It is one of those truths so difficult to demonstrate that music is not only "the heart of sounds", but that it is better defined as a counterpoint of sound and silence', Pierre Boulez, "Domain Musical," *Bulletin International de Musique Contemporaine*, 1 (1954): 124 quoted in Haroldo de Campos, "The Open Work of Art," 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Boulez, addressing his lack of interest in the diamond-like finite work, in favour of a concept of openness in the arts. The author finally suggests the adoption of the notion of Neo-Baroque to group the unconventional formulas that feature in contemporary artistic languages.

Eco himself cites the ‘Baroque spirituality’ as the very first appearance of a modern culture. The Baroque work of art does not need to be contemplated as something beautiful, but demands to be investigated as a ‘mystery’ that stimulates our imagination. However, Eco remarks, it would be fallacious to consider the Baroque as the first conscious programmatic theorisation of the open work: the notion of openness wittingly manifested itself only in the second half in the nineteenth century, precisely in the work of Verlaine and Mallarmé.³⁰ Like Haroldo, Eco refers to Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) as an example of an infinite cosmos, where acts and words are intertwined in a relation of reciprocal causality. Eco pushes the argument even further by comparing *Finnegan’s Wake* with the medieval poet Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* (1304-1321). Both poems indeed exemplify the poetics of the open work. However, as Eco emphasises:

In the case of Dante, this renewed aesthetic enjoyment has for its object the communication of a univocal message, whereas in the case of Joyce, the author’s intent is to have a reader enjoying in an always diverse and changing manner a message that in itself (and thanks to the form that the author has created) is plurivocal.³¹

According to the nature of the message conveyed, Eco distinguishes between a general openness that characterises the ‘good literature of a period’ and a more specific openness proper to the contemporary era that features a ‘semantic polyvalent’ message.³² Compared to Haroldo’s, Eco’s analysis of *Finnegan’s Wake* is conducted from multiple perspectives, which include the author’s communicative intent. Nonetheless they develop the same argument concerning the ambiguity of both the message and the role of the reader.

³⁰ See Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 32-33.

³¹ Ibid., 80, my translation.

³² De Mallac, “The Poetics of the Open Form,” 32.

Another example mentioned in both texts is the American sculptor Alexander Calder's mobiles. Following on from Haroldo, who refers briefly to Calder's use of air to display a certain structure, Eco defines the mobiles more accurately as 'works in movement':

In the present cultural context, the phenomenon of the 'work in movement' is certainly not limited to music. There are, for example, artistic products which display an intrinsic mobility, a kaleidoscopic capacity to suggest themselves in constantly renewed aspects to the consumer. A simple example is provided by Calder's mobiles or by mobile compositions by other artists: elementary structures which can move in the air and assume different spatial dispositions. They continuously create their own space and the shapes to fill it.³³

As demonstrated, all the examples discussed in Haroldo's writing overlap in Eco's narrative to such an extent that the former can effectively be read as the preface of the latter.

Eco's *The Open Work* also plays an important role in Ferreira Gullar's *Vanguarda e Subsedenvolvimento, ensaios sobre arte*.³⁴ The latter had been written by Gullar between 1965 and 1969, soon after the military coup and the charged debates that took place within the PCB (the Brazilian communist party) and the RCB (the Revista Civilização Brasileira), as well as in the group Opinião. With the 1964 civil-military coup, the Brazilian left undertook a process of re-orientation and self-criticism. The military regime censored any possible affiliation between the intellectual élite and the masses already advocated by Gullar. This aforementioned 'alliance' recalls Antonio Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual'. According to Gramsci, the 'organic intellectual' is a cultivated man who aims with his behaviour and work to become the direct expression of a certain social class and its interests. The Marxist philosopher sees the communist party as the 'organic intellectual' par excellence: it indeed 'represents the totality of interests and aspiration of the

³³ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 12.

³⁴ Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subsedenvolvimento* (RJ: Editora Civilização Brasileira) 1978.

working class, becoming at the same time its political, moral and ideal leader'.³⁵

Gullar became a militant of the PCB and constantly worked with both the RCB and the group Opinião, actively contributing to its genesis. In 'Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento' Gullar questions the notion of the avant-garde as applied to an underdeveloped country such as Brazil, suggesting the possibility of an alternative idea. In this historical detour, Gullar affirms that major changes in terms of artistic production happened in Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century; the end of World War II restored contact between Brazil and United States, allowing the influence of foreign artistic practices. According to Gullar, Concretism is the first avant-garde movement in Brazil. Concrete artists and writers went beyond the old-fashioned formal impasse that characterised the Brazilian cultural reality of that time by reducing the poem to a 'mere visual sign', and thus dilapidating its structure and content. Hence Gullar proposes to rethink the contemporary era under a different perspective borrowing from Eco the idea of 'open work'. He writes:

The nature of the artistic avant-gardes can be better defined by the general conception of 'open work', which Eco has determined in his famous essay. Indeed, while the notion of avant-garde is inaccurate and arbitrary – since the definition of 'the most advance' is controversial – the idea of 'open work' seeks to pinpoint a general characteristic that is proper of modern art, which encompasses Joyces as well as Kafka, Pound, Eluard, Webern as well as Stravinsky, Matisse as well as Max Bill or Wols. Thanks to this concept, it is possible to distinguish between the art of the past and the present, as well as to avoid ridiculous discriminations between formalism and realism.³⁶

³⁵ Gramsci cited in Fornero Abbagnano, *La ricerca del pensiero* (Milano-Torino: Paravia-Pearson), 154-158.

³⁶ 'O caráter das vanguardas artísticas define-se melhor dentro do conceito geral de "obra aberta", que Umberto Eco procurou fundamentar num ensaio famoso. Enquanto a noção de "vanguarda" é imprecisa e arbitrária – já que a própria definição do que é "mais avançado" é polêmica – o conceito de "obra aberta" busca precisar uma característica geral da arte moderna, que tanto abrange Joyce quanto Kafka, Pound quanto Éluar, Webern quanto Stravinsky, Matisse quanto Max Bill ou Wols. Munido de tal conceito, pode se distinguir entre a arte do passado e do presente como, no seio desta, sem discriminações estapafúrdias, entre o formalismo e o realismo.' Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento*, 50, my translation.

Eco's conceptualisation of the 'open work' seems to Gullar the only model capable of solving the dilemma concerning the use of a European category, such as 'avant-garde', to describe art practices that took place in underdeveloped countries. Indeed, the 'open work' dismantles the dichotomy between centre and periphery, mainstream and marginal.³⁷ It also provides a synthesis of the arts, as it circumscribes diverse practices, discarding fixed categorisations.

However, as Gullar affirms, the value of an artwork should not be measured according to its 'openness'.³⁸ The radicalisation of the concept of openness could lead, in Gullar's thinking, to the breakdown of structures, jeopardising the communicability of the work of art itself. For these reasons, Gullar proposes the adoption of a Marxist methodology in order to guarantee artistic communication and to preserve its faculties of formal creation. This becomes possible because in the author's view the Marxist method is also open; the Marxist 'opening' elaborated by Gullar concerns endless possibilities of expressing the contradictions of reality. These contradictions become the matrix of the composition of the work of art, which aims to overcome formalism and subjectivism.³⁹

2 Hélio Oiticica's writings: against Eco's 'Openness'?

Like Gullar, Oiticica reworks Eco's idea of openness in several texts, conferring on it an ambivalent connotation. He deliberately places himself in antagonism with Eco's ideas but as I am going to demonstrate on the basis of the analysis of some of his writings, Oiticica's understanding of 'openness' does not entirely differ from Eco's.

³⁷ As I have already argued in chapter 2, the challenge to such categorisations was already pursued by several scholars like Mari Carmen Ramirez, Hector Olea, and Luis Camnitzer among others.

³⁸ I think Gullar misunderstands Eco in this passage. Eco does not conceive the 'openness' of a work as a metre of judgement nor as its very end.

³⁹ See Marcus Vinicius Furtado da Silva Oliveira, "A cultura política em Ferreira Gullar (1963-1969)", accessed June 20, 2013, URL http://www.encontro2012.mg.anpuh.org/resources/anais/24/1340632243_arquivo_aculturapoliticaemFerreiraGullar_1963-1969.pdf

The first group of handwritten notes that deal with this idea – titled simply ‘Anotações para desenvolver’ (Notes to be developed) – is dated between 24 October 1966 and 22 November 1966.⁴⁰ In this text Oiticica never mentions Eco – as he will do in later writings – but talks extensively about the open nature of his own work, especially in regards to the *Parangolé* capes. Oiticica starts his argument by summarising his artistic path from his Neo-Concrete affiliation in 1959 onwards. He then comments upon an article published in 1962 in the magazine *Habitat* in which he had expressed his fears about the possible compromise between art and ‘social realism’. From this consideration a new ‘constructive ideal’ (New Objectivity) emerges alongside the will of pursuing a ‘totalidade’ (totality) – namely the dissolution of the boundaries between the work of art and life. This novel engagement with the environment is exemplified in works such as the *Nucleos*, the *Penétraveis* (both 1960/1961), and the *Parangolés* (1964). Oiticica describes the *Penétraveis* as capable of creating their own environment and thus possessing architectural qualities. *Parangolé* capes are instead portrayed as ‘structures of formation’ that incorporate movement (dance). Oiticica depicts dance as an ‘open work’, as a ‘primordial element of the environment’ and as a ‘primary gesture’, the principle of motion of the act itself.⁴¹ In summary, Oiticica invokes close identification between ‘gesture’ and ‘environment’: this association assembles a form of art characterised by ‘un sentido subjetivo’ (a subjective sense/feeling).

In a subsequent text, named ‘O Objeto – Instâncias do problema do Objeto’ (The Object – Instances on the Problem of the Object) dated 1968, Oiticica redefines the notion of the object departing from the acknowledgement of ‘the picture plane as an active element’.⁴² The former interpretation leads to a conceptualisation of the object as a continuous discovery of the world, as something that moves beyond the canonical division between subject and object itself. In Oiticica’s thinking a sound or a cry might also constitute an object. Eco comes into play in Oiticica’s discourse as the last element of a

⁴⁰ AHO/PHO 0192/66.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² AHO/PHO 0130/68.

chain, the final piece in a series of theoretical speculations on the idea of ‘work of art’. In the closing part of this essay, Oiticica mentions Rogerio Duarte’s ‘Projeto’ as an ‘open’ project antithetical to that of Eco. According to Oiticica, Duarte’s Projeto merges together multiple experiences of human creation. An actualisation of this idea can be found, according to Oiticica, in Lygia Pape’s *Eggs* series (1968).

In a series of handwritten notes entitled ‘Sem Título’ and dated 1968, Oiticica talks extensively about the nature of the work of art in relation to the Brazilian context.⁴³ Indeed, he bestows the invention of the ‘object’ on Ferreira Gullar. However, the advent of the military dictatorship, according to Oiticica, inevitably changed the frame and the way of conceiving the artistic avant-garde: ‘participation’ as form social engagement becomes the new slogan. Oiticica remarks that the evolution of his concept of ‘work of art’, in term of ‘openness’ and thus ‘totalidade’ or ‘germinative community’ has nothing to do with Eco’s theoretical construct.

In an interview conducted by Walmir Ayala, ‘A criação plastic em questão, respostas’ Oiticica responds to twenty-five questions on ‘participation’, Brazilian national art, political engagement, and the concepts of the ‘new’, ‘time’ and ‘space’.⁴⁴ Notably, Oiticica affirms that his practice has gone beyond the ‘open work’ towards Rogerio Duarte’s idea of ‘Projeto’, in which the object exists as ‘infinite possibility’, as ‘individual proposition within a process’ (of creation).

In a conversation with Duarte, published in ‘Apocalipópótesis’[fig. 3.2], Oiticica emphasises the anarchic attitude of his practice to the extent of deconstructing the label ‘work’ itself in favour of the term ‘proposition’, which better defines his products.⁴⁵ Notably, Oiticica affirms that the pioneering idea of the ‘proposition’ is suitable to replace not only the notion of work, but also the concept of ‘open work’. In this text the artist defines openness ‘somewhat alike Eco’s idea but with differences that should be looked for, mainly because I ignored Eco’s theory of the open work when I already confronted it, in my

⁴³ AHO/PHO 0137/68, 6th August 1968.

⁴⁴ AHO/PHO 0159/68, December 1968.

⁴⁵ AHO/PHO 0534/69, 1969. In English in the original.

early evolution.’⁴⁶ Tracing an analogy between his *Bólides* and the ‘open work’, Oiticica points out he became acquainted with Eco’s model only later. He then stresses again the importance of the idea of ‘Probjeto’ that allows the object to take on endless ‘possibilities’ or, more appropriately, ‘probabilities’:

The idea of object itself is ambivalent, very different from its original source: the object is a probability, not the result of one probability, but the potentiality of a probability, that can be many – here the probability is a collective term that can turn out into many things, a generic term for a come out in the future, not a closed term in itself. Each possibility, inside n ones, would manifest in time and space in a special opened way.⁴⁷

The event *Apocalipopótese*, already discussed in the previous chapter, is an example of ‘Probjeto’ in which experience (*vivência*) and procedure become more significant than the factual realisation of the idea. Experience is indeed exemplified by the participation of the spectator, which in turn shapes the structure of the work.

In a piece of writing dedicated to the work of the Mexican artist Rubens Gerchman titled ‘Série Aberta 1/Gerchman’ (1969), Oiticica insists on the innovative definition of the object as ‘open’ made by Ferreira Gullar earlier than Eco. Indeed he states that Neo-Concrete experiences were already authentic ‘open works’ long before Eco’s theory came to the fore.⁴⁸ According to Oiticica, Gullar’s idea of the non-object proposed something more open than the model introduced by Eco, by defining, already by the end of 1959, the structure of the non-object as ‘open immobility’.

In the last text I consider here, the slightly later ‘Para Risério, Bahia’ (1974), Oiticica goes briefly back to mention Eco, this time in reference to Decio Pignatari, and particularly to his book *Contracomunicação* (1971). Oiticica enhances how Pignatari’s notion of openness has nothing to share with Eco’s, but it is something new (Decio Pignatari never refers to Eco in his

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ AHO/PHO 0534/69, 1969.

⁴⁸ AHO/PHO 0442/69, 4 August 1969.

book).⁴⁹ Oiticica's reception of Eco is rather puzzling. I hypothesise that this is mainly due to the fact that Oiticica did not fully read *The Open Work*. From the references he makes, it is possible to infer that he had heard of Eco's text – which testifies to its popularity in Brazil at that time – but he probably did not fully read it.

The artist places his notion of 'openness' in antagonism with Eco's model since he tries to define his own position, avoiding any reliance to Eco's model. However, from my analysis it becomes apparent that Oiticica's theories are not far from Eco's. Oiticica's initial conception of openness needs to be understood in terms of 'space' and to be referred to the relationship between the work and the surrounding environment, with no particular attention at this stage to the role of the spectator. In Eco's work the notion of space is fictitious, and the discussion is limited to the relationship between reader and author. Yet ideas of 'environmental openness' and 'structural openness' must be conceived as two sides of the same coin. A work of art that does not possess an open structure cannot appropriate the surrounding space. Indeed Eco's theory does not define an idea; but rather proposes an interpretative model. Furthermore, Oiticica acknowledges Duarte's idea of 'probjeto' as antagonistic to Eco: while Duarte aims to advance 'propositions' that deal with the foundation of a 'germinative community', Eco suggests a descriptive model that frames communicative exchanges. Communicative relations in Eco inform both the reader and the work. Eco does consider the reader in terms of a collective – the ideal reader can be any one of us – however he does not push the argument to the point of asserting the emergence of 'living situations' (*vivências*).⁵⁰ Yet in Oiticica's writings the idea of the 'probjeto' comes into play also in the definition of the 'object' as an 'ambivalent potentiality of infinite possibilities'. This classification is closer to the idea of a 'pluri-isotopic nature' that Eco bestows on the work of art.

⁴⁹ Decio Pignatari, *Contracomunicação*, (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1971); AHO/PHO 0257/74, 17 November- 6 December 1974.

⁵⁰ On this matter see Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *vivências/Lebenserfahrung/Life Experience* (Wien: Generali Foundation; Köln: König, 2000).

Another key point in Oiticica's discussion on the open work is the conceptualisation of 'totalidade'. The 'totality' conveyed by the work of art is characterised, according to the artist, by a 'sentido subjetivo'. This legitimation of a 'subjective feeling' can be explained in light of Kester's dialogical aesthetics:

In dialogical aesthetics subjectivity is formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori 'content' with other already formed subjects but is itself intended to model subjectivity.⁵¹

This statement can be read in conformity to Eco's aesthetics as well. However, while the content is not given 'a priori' – although it already has a certain structure – the audience is, in the sense that the work cannot exist prior to the reader. What position does Oiticica undertake in this respect? I develop this point further in the following section on Oiticica's *Parangolé*.

To conclude, Eco's *The Open Work* became very popular in Brazil following its translation into Portuguese in 1968. This can be deduced also from Oiticica's texts: regardless of his friendship and acquaintance with the work of Haroldo, Oiticica never mentions his understanding of 'openness', but only Eco's.⁵² Eco's work, despite having been anticipated by Haroldo's text, was better received than its original source in Brazil. Nonetheless, in an article published in 1978 on the 'history' of semiotics, Haroldo avoids mentioning, perhaps deliberately, Eco's importance among the reception of structuralism and semiotics in Brazil.⁵³ He only refers to his own concept of openness as 'developed on the basis of a precise selection of examples (Mallarmé, Joyce, Pound, Cummings, Calder, the post-Weber trends in Music)', examples that, Haroldo points out, 'are not different from the ones subsequently brought into

⁵¹ Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 112.

⁵² The mutual friendship and admiration between Haroldo and Oiticica is also testified to by an interview published in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, in which Haroldo talks extensively about Oiticica's work as an example of his (and Eco's, as Haroldo himself claims) understanding of openness. See Lenora de Barros, "O vôo da razão sensível de Hélio Oiticica," *Folha de São Paulo*, July 26, 1986.

⁵³ Haroldo de Campos, "Structuralism and Semiotics in Brazil: retrospect/prospect," *Dispositio*, III (1978): 175-187.

focus by Umberto Eco.’⁵⁴ He thus implicitly affirmed his leadership in the conceptualisation of the open work.

Haroldo’s *Open Work* was later republished in 1981 in another issue of the journal *Dispositio*.⁵⁵ In the foreword the editor of the issue Maria Lúcia Santaella Braga asserts:

The fact that this article [Haroldo’s *The Open Work*] is the first to appear in this issue is due to our intention to make it the symbol of that branch of semiotic and literary research that at present seems to us to be the most vigorous and fruitful in Brazil, that is the research that results from the source of an authentic analogical and structural thought.⁵⁶

The intention is quite clear: to re-establish Haroldo’s authority in the field, consequently overshadowing Eco’s contribution.

As I have already argued, Eco’s *The Open Work* was greeted with as a reminder of the avant-garde utopian hope of dismantling the boundaries between art and life. The participation of the spectator was seen under a ‘pedagogical attitude’ claimed by both the artist and the work of art. The intent was twofold: to make an art that held the promise of a democratic world – an obvious reaction to the 1964 military coup – and to locate the work outside the art market, thus restoring its value independently from a corporative economy. A work conceived as ‘open’ could have been smuggled away from the institutions, leading as well to the autonomous emancipation of the audience.

2.2 Scholarly criticism on Participatory Art: uses and misuses of Eco’s Openness

If on one side (...) Haroldo de Campos was recognised by Umberto Eco as having anticipated similar theoretical ideas on the incompleteness of the work, on the other, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica pursued highly inventive and experimental research that meant they

⁵⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁵⁵ Haroldo de Campos, “The Open Work of Art,” *Dispositio*, 6 (Summer-Fall 1981): 5-7.

⁵⁶ Maria Lúcia Santaella Braga, *Foreword*, Ibid., 1-3.

entered the 1960s and 1970s with an open consideration of the participation as necessary part of the aesthetic gesture.⁵⁷

In the third part of this chapter I will discuss Oiticica's work under Eco's hermeneutical model, emphasising the origin of a novel participatory practice – namely the *Parangolé* capes. As a premise, it is vital to consider the involvement of contemporary criticism with Eco's aesthetics, which has to date been neglected in the existing literature.

It must be remembered that Eco's theory is prevalent in this thesis firstly for historical reasons – *The Open Work*, published in 1962 influenced, directly or indirectly, the work that Oiticica and Manzoni were making in the same years – and secondly because it focuses on the communicative process performed by the interrelation between the work and the viewer. The international importance that Eco's semiological book still holds in current debates is certified by the frequent references Bishop makes to it. In her influential essay 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', Bishop draws analogies between the work of Rirkrit Tiravanjia and Liam Gillick and Eco's 'development of communicative situations'. Yet she fiercely criticises the way Bourriaud uses Eco's arguments:

However, it is Eco's contention that every work of art is potentially 'open', since it might produce an unlimited range of possible readings [...] Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality, rather than issues of reception. His position also differs from Eco in another important respect: Eco regarded the work of art as a reflection of the conditions of our existence in a fragmented modern culture while Bourriaud sees the work of art as producing these conditions.⁵⁸

I would agree with Bishop if Bourriaud made any direct reference to Eco in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998); however there is not a single page where Bourriaud explicitly quotes Eco. This critique of an absent fault weakens Bishop's argument, and places it in the zone of the predominantly speculative.

⁵⁷ Ricardo Basbaum, "Post-participatory Participation," *Afterall*, 28 (Autumn/winter 2011) 94

⁵⁸ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004) 62

Also, Bishop slides into a similar misunderstanding of Eco's notion of 'activation' when she argues about Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002) that, 'significantly, the viewer is no longer required to participate literally (i.e. to eat noodles, or to activate a sculpture) but is asked only to be a thoughtful and reflective visitor.'⁵⁹ It is not clear in this passage whether Bishop acknowledges the audience's conceptual engagement as a form of participatory art or not. Indeed, she seems to deny the activation of the work of art on the behalf of the audience when she affirms that Hirschhorn's 'independent stance' makes his work 'the product of a single artist's vision'.⁶⁰

On the occasion of *documenta 11* (2002), Thomas Hirschhorn constructed an installation/monument dedicated to theorist and philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and deliberately did not place it in any of the official venues of the event except Friedrich-Wöhler Siedlung, a mixed Turkish-German social housing complex in a low socio-economic suburb of Kassel. Despite the fact that visitors were paid, their engagement with Hirschhorn's work is the condition for its very existence. It is a structure that exists *a priori* for being designed by the artist – to borrow from Kester – but is not complete without the audience's engagement. Indeed, when Eco affirms that a work needs to be 'activated' by the reader, he does not refer only to kinetic forms of art – those that indeed require a direct handling of the object – or to practices that demand the physical engagement of the body of the spectator, but mainly to an intellectual/conceptual engagement. He develops the 'interpretative attitude of the reader', his 'execution' of the work, by paraphrasing Luigi Pareyson's *Theory of Formation* (1960):

Differences exist between the empirical operation of the interpreter as 'performer' (the instrumentalist who performs a piece of music, or the actor who recites a text), and that of the interpreter as 'user' (one who looks at a painting or reads a poem in silence or listens to a piece of music preformed by others). However, for the purpose of an aesthetic analysis, both cases are seen as different manifestations of the same interpretative attitude: each reading, 'enjoyment' or 'contemplation' of a

⁵⁹ Bishop, "Antagonism," 76.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

work of art represent a form, albeit private and tacit, of ‘execution’. The concept of ‘interpretative process’ includes all these approaches.⁶¹

Let us consider this quote in relation to Bourriaud’s theory. Accepting part of the materialistic tradition from the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990), the French critic defines ‘Relational Aesthetics’ not as ‘a theory of art’, that ‘imply the statement of an origin and destination’, but as ‘a theory of form’, and thus places himself in continuity with and not in contrast to Eco’s model.⁶²

Indeed, while Russian formalists conceived the notion of ‘poetics’ as the study of the linguistic structure of a literary work, Eco’s understanding of ‘poetics’ is closer to the classical meaning of the word: it does not stand for a system of constrictive rules but as an operational programme interpreted from time to time by the artist. Similarly, the notion of ‘open work’:

is not a critical category, but a hypothetical model, even upon the basis of numerous concrete analysis, useful to indicate a direction of contemporary art. [...] The “structure of an open work” is not the individual structure of a certain work but the general model that describes not only a group of works but a group of works in a certain relationship of fruition with their receptors. [...] The model of an open work doesn’t redisplay an alleged objective structure of the works, but the structure of a relation of fruition.⁶³

Bishop establishes two major differences between Eco and Bourriaud. In the first instance, unlike Eco, Bourriaud banishes issues of reception from his argument, ‘redirecting the argument back to artistic intentionality’.⁶⁴ Secondly, Eco understands contemporary works of art as the reflection of the modern fragmented world, while Bourriaud turns this point of view upside down and

⁶¹ Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 25, my translation. See Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica – Teoria della formatività* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1960).

⁶² See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. 19.

⁶³ ‘La nozione di “opera aperta” non è una categoria critica, ma rappresenta un modello ipotetico, sia pure elaborato sulla scorta di numerose analisi concrete, utilissimo per indicare una direzione dell’arte contemporanea. (...) La “struttura di un’opera aperta” non sarà la struttura singola delle varie opere, ma il modello generale che descrive non solo un gruppo di opere, ma un gruppo di opere in quanto poste in una determinata relazione fruitiva con i loro ricettori. (...) il modello di un’opera aperta non riproduce una presunta struttura oggettiva delle opere, ma la struttura di un rapporto fruitivo.’ Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 9-10, 13, my translation.

⁶⁴ See Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, 62.

sees the works as ‘producing these differences’.⁶⁵ Bourriaud’s discussion is lacking another crucial point that is the critical acknowledgement of 1960s art practices and theories – a time when the issues of ‘participation’, ‘authorship’ and ‘openness’ entered the scene.⁶⁶

Bourriaud’s rejection of this historical perspective is greatly criticised by art historian Judith Rodenbeck, who affirms: ‘for, by dismissing the 1960s, Bourriaud evades a number of key concerns that were raised at the moment when art broke into multiple dimensions.’⁶⁷ To fill this theoretical gap, Rodenbeck proposes to ‘address these questions by putting those terms Bourriaud has retrofitted – “interactive”, “user-friendly”, “relational” – back into the historical perspective’. She rightfully acknowledges Duchamp’s ‘The Creative Act’ (1957) as the significant predecessor of the ‘activation of the audience’ professed by ‘Relational Aesthetics’.⁶⁸ Furthermore, she discusses Eco’s theory as an exemplary model of participation on a twofold level. Firstly by adopting the ‘open work’ as the exegetical frame for John Cage’s 1952 composition, 4’33”, which is in turn considered as its ‘purest’ exemplar. Secondly, by electing Eco’s model – and particularly his idea of ‘oriented insertion’ – as the champion definition of participation par excellence.⁶⁹ It indeed envisages the active reconfiguration of the work of art. However, Rodenbeck makes a noteworthy conclusion on the relation between ‘open work’ and ‘participation’, enhancing the specificity of Eco’s discourse:

But the open work is not the same as participatory art. This is not a reflexive pairing. Rather, the open work implies participation but of a very particular kind. The open work requires an active, cognitive participation (including physical engagement) that goes beyond a weak description of participation simply as ‘awareness’ and toward participation as an active-decision making. Further, the open work takes

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ This gap is filled by the already quoted book by Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2012, that interestingly enough is missing a chapter on Brazilian art.

⁶⁷ Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011) 255.

⁶⁸ Published as Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” *Art News* 56 (Summer 1957)

⁶⁹ I very much see this last assumption as quite disorientating for the sake of its grounding idea – i.e. that the definition of ‘participatory art’ can be graded on a similar scale.

that cognitive participation as structural necessity. [...] Finally, in the open work, iterability is a structuring problematic.⁷⁰

The investigation I have conducted on current literature on participation, surveying the relationship that contemporary writers establish with Eco, aims to differentiate my own use and understanding of Eco's model that I have applied to analyse Oiticica's and Manzoni's works.

2 Open participation in the practice of Hélio Oiticica and Piero Manzoni: what is the *Parangolé*?

NON-VERBAL corporal proposition taken to a level of open experimentalism absorption of time: end of fragmented display: to speak of cosmos should not imply something extra-concrete but the adaptation of power to invent the NON-FRAGMENTED.⁷¹

Enabling the absorption of the participator into a full 'non-fragmentary collective', Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes were born from the artists' experience with the First Community School of Samba in Rio de Janeiro in 1964. Considered by Oiticica as 'Totalidade-obra', a total work of art, *Parangolé* capes are the culmination of Oiticica's experience with colour and space [fig. 3.3]. The *Parangolés* enact a fusion between colours, different fabrics, dance, words, pictures and music. Refusing a univocal label – they might be called banners, tents, dresses, layers of colourful clothes – *Parangolés* are 'activated' through dance [fig. 3.4]. Only the body's movement is able to reveal their structure. Following on from the *Bólides*, the *Parangolé* capes demand a different kind of participation: not confined to the tactile gaze of the audience as in previous works, they expand into public action.

Parangolé also enacts a transformation of the idea of the author, who is no longer the creator of objects for contemplation but becomes the provocateur

⁷⁰ Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes*, 252.

⁷¹ Quoted in Anna Schober, *Hélio Oiticica's Parangolés: Body-Events, Participation in the Anti-Doxa of the Avant-Garde and Struggling Free from It*, Theory@Buffalo9, accessed June 27, 2015, <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/anna.schober/Schober.pdf>.

of situations lived by the public.⁷² The shift occurs from an intellectual engagement to the bodily inclusion of the audience in the work. *Parangolé* capes are also tools to express political dissatisfaction by showing phrases like 'I embody revolt' or 'I'm owned' and therefore establishing according to the artist's intent empathetic axis between the author and its collaborators.

Recent years have witnessed a considerable surge of interest in Oiticica's *Parangolé*. Scholars have emphasised the diverse participatory aspects of these works, unfolding novel perspectives. Art historian Anna Dezeuze has underscored the ideological and phenomenological circuit in which the *Parangolé* capes took place. She stresses Oiticica's will 'to give a voice to the unheard' by reversing the viewer/participant perception from 'who I am?' to 'who am I in the gaze of the other?'.⁷³ Scholar Karl Posso has considered their anarchic quality, as well as their 'ethical end' in facilitating a process of creating 'empathetic relations'.⁷⁴ Paula Braga has proposed a novel interpretation of the works. Following on from Waly Salomão's expression *entrar em parafuso* ('to get into a state'), Braga draws a parallelism between this 'trance-like' state reached by the movement of the body wearing the capes and Nietzsche's merging of the Apollonian force with its Dionysian counterpart, defined as 'the collective delight of intoxication achieved through music and dance'.⁷⁵ Critic Anna Schober has talked about the 'monkhood' quality of *Parangolé*'s textiles and its paradoxically carnivalesque appearance, locating the work in transition between 'religious-mythical rituals and profane ones'.⁷⁶ Notably, all of these scholars share an interest in the enactment of a twofold process: the transmutation undertaken by the participant that allows

⁷² While Eco acknowledges the act of looking and thinking as a form of engagement, he also establishes a difference between the 'user' and the 'participant' that recalls Oiticica's distinction between active and passive participation. I personally bear on Eco's greater understanding of participation given by the openness of the work but I equally set a dissimilarity between physical participation and intellectual engagement.

⁷³ Anna Dezeuze, "Tactile Dematerialization, sensory politics: Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé*," *Art Journal* 63 (Summer 2004): 58-71.

⁷⁴ Karl Posso, "An Ethics of Displaying Affection: Hélio Oiticica's Expression of Joy and Togetherness," *Portuguese Studies*, 29 (2013): 44-77.

⁷⁵ Paula Braga, "Hélio Oiticica and the *Parangolés*: (Ad)dressing Nietzsche's *übermensch*," *Third Text* 17 (2003): 43-52.

⁷⁶ Anna Schober, "Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*".

the experience of the ‘suprasensorial’, and the shift of the role of the artist from ‘creator’ to ‘instigator of creation’.⁷⁷

However, little or no attention has been placed on the process of *activating* participation. Rodrigues da Silva provides useful insights to the purpose of my argument. By quoting art historian Guy Brett, he stresses the polysemic character of the *Parangolé* around three different meanings:

The first part could be entitled ‘Interior/ Exterior’ and refers to the *Parangolé* in connection with a discourse where the form evolves towards the idea of human freedom. In the second part, ‘The beggar’s Rags/The king’s Robes’ [Les Haillons du mendiant/Les Robes du roi], I try to understand the emergence of the *Parangolé* within the post-colonial and polarised social reality of Brazil. In the third, ‘The water Bag/The Bed Linen’ [La Poche de eaux/Le Linceul], the *Parangolé* is considered in the light of certain dilemmas connected subjectivity and experience in a broader, universal sense.⁷⁸

Borrowing from both Brett and Rodrigues da Silva, it can be said that the *Parangolés*’ ‘process of signification’ originates from the pairing of contraries. This double nature signifies the activation of its meaning on a twofold level – physical and conceptual. The work demands to be completed physically by the audience and to be interpreted from an external ‘intellectual’ point of view.⁷⁹ Yet the work remains in itself ambiguous. As Eco argued, ‘ambiguity’ is proper of an ‘open work’: ‘That ambiguity becomes – in contemporary poetics – one of the explicit aims of the work, a value to be realized in preference to others.’⁸⁰ What I want to emphasise here is that the *Parangolés*’ ‘ambiguity’ allows a peculiar relation of consumption between the work and the audience. Indeed it presupposes activation by two kinds of users: the ‘spectator’ who

⁷⁷ See Hélio Oiticica, *Position and Program*, July 1966, reprinted and translated in *Hélio Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1992), 89.

⁷⁸ Guy Brett, “Fait sur le Corps: Le *Parangolé* de Hélio Oiticica,” *Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, 51 (Spring 1995): 34, quoted in Rodrigues da Silva, “Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolé* or the art of transgression,” *Third Text* 19 (2005): 215.

⁷⁹ Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization, sensory politics” 59. By ‘intellectual’ here I mean something closer to ‘conceptual’. Oiticica have discussed the *Parangolés* as the result of his progressive de-intellectualisation: ‘First of all, it must be clarified that my interest in dance, rhythm, samba in particular, reached me as a vital necessity of de-intellectualisation [desintelectualização], of intellectual de-inhibition [desinibição intelectual], of the necessity of a free expression, since I felt that my expression was threatened by excessive intellectualisation.’ Hélio Oiticica, ‘A Dança na minha Experiência,’ quoted in Rodrigues da Silva, “Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolé*,” 214.

⁸⁰ Eco, *The Open Work*, 6.

becomes ‘participator’ by physically wearing the robes, moving in the space and carrying a message written by the artist, and the spectator who remains a ‘viewer’, to whom the message is addressed.

In this communicative relation, the dichotomous nature of the ‘recipient’ is reversed in both the duality of the process of fruition – defined as both ‘interpretation’ and ‘execution’ – and its production of multiple meanings and interpretations, which are proper of a structurally open work. Interpretation is enacted according to this bi-dimensional procedure and on the behalf of two kinds of interpreters: the interpreter as ‘executor’ and the interpreter as ‘user’. It follows that, as Eco remarks, every consumption of the work is simultaneously an ‘interpretation’ and an ‘execution’.⁸¹ Both operations are part of a communicative process, in which the message conveyed assumes different functions. Eco distinguishes between ‘referential’ and ‘emotional’ functions. The former takes place when the message signifies something ‘definitive’ and, if necessary, verifiable. The latter that informs the *Parangolé* occurs when: ‘The message aims to elicit reactions in the receptor, to stimulate associations, to promote behavioural responses that go beyond the simple recognition of what is indicated.’⁸² As already noted by scholars, Oiticica’s intention went beyond the mere enactment of a ‘supra-sensorial’ experience, but it was not abstracted from it. The *Parangolé* has indeed an ideological foundation. Here, I want to address two hypothetical sources: his grandfather José Oiticica and Ferreira Gullar. José Oiticica was a philologist and anarchist, a militant in the group *Ação Direta* and author of the book *O anarquismo ao alcance de todos* (‘Anarchism available to all’). The latter was published in the magazine *Ação Direta* from 1946 to 1959. Notably, in this book José Oiticica addresses the major postulates of the anarchist doctrine in a simple language, fully accessible to all. Oiticica’s grandfather discusses anarchist theory with references to contemporary historical situation; he expands on electoral

⁸¹ See Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 26.

⁸² ‘Il messaggio mira a suscitare reazioni nel ricettore, a stimolare associazioni, a promuovere comportamenti di risposta che vadano al di là del semplice riconoscimento della cosa indicate,’ Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 65, my translation.

matters, and on how to boycott election; he harshly criticizes state and bourgeois economy, taking on an anti-clerical position.

Theorist and writer Ferreira Gullar was one of Oiticica's mentors. I am referring to the Neo-Concrete period (1959-1961) when Oiticica and fellow artists Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, among others, aligned themselves with Gullar's 'Theory of the Non-Object' (1959) which describes the work of art as a 'quasi-corpus' able to engender an intimate relationship with the viewer, both from a tactile and visual perspective. Soon Gullar withdrew from the group, having become disillusioned about the arts and the role of the artist, which he saw as deeply subjected to the élitist commercial circuit enacted by the bourgeoisie. As can be inferred from the text quoted above, *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento*, Gullar adopted a militant position, claiming for a closer relationship between the figure of the artist and the masses. As noted by Anna Dezeuze:

Gullar called for artists to acknowledge that their apparent neutrality was in fact embedded in the ideological position of an oppressive bourgeoisie that prize and bought their works. Instead, artists should assume responsibility as citizens and communicate with the people in order to deal with the real problems plaguing Brazil.⁸³

Influenced by both Gullar's novel political stance and recent socio-political turmoil, Oiticica aimed to raise class-consciousness through an anti-artistic participatory practice. Oiticica believed that *Parangolé* capes, being a 'collective' oeuvre, worked for a utopian democratisation of society, making visible the marginalised layers of the Brazilian population living in the shantytown. This assumption advances several concerns. Firstly, as already argued by Anna Dezeuze, Oiticica's affirmation that the *Parangolé* can be worn by any viewer is denied by personal dedications and contemporary photographic documentation, in which most of the people wearing the capes are those of Mangueira.⁸⁴

⁸³ Dezeuze, "Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics," 64.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 60.

A second point of contention is raised when we pose the following rhetorical question: if the people of the Mangueira are the ‘executors’ of the work, then who is the viewer/interpreter? Answering this question requires a semantic shift, from a semiological standpoint to a sociological one. In his writings, Oiticica insists on the ‘environmental character’ of the *Parangolé*, meaning that it borrows elements from the environment and it relates to the surrounding space.⁸⁵ His idea of ‘openness’ is linked to the description of the *Parangolés* as ‘colour-structure in the environmental space’:

Parangolé aspires to an ‘environmental art’ par excellence, which may or may not arrive at a characteristic architecture. (...) The spectator’s participation is also, here, of the same ‘environmental’ kind. It is a search for ‘environmental wholes’ which would be created and explored in all their orders, from the infinitely small to the architectural, urban space, etc. (...) The ‘tent’, also, is erected according to the environmental relation, which here requires a ‘path of the spectator’, an unveiling of its structure by the spectator’s direct bodily action.⁸⁶

The *Parangolé*’s significance arises from relations of reciprocity. It is conceived as a ‘total work of art’ that moulds the environment and in turn it is shaped by it. What does the ‘environment’ connote? To answer this, I will shift attention from the work’s spatial location, understood in abstract terms, to its socio-environmental position. It is here where the duality of the spectator (participant/viewer) comes into play.

In his text ‘Environmental Program’ (1967), Oiticica affirms that *Parangolé* is the formulation of ‘anti-art’ par excellence and that an ‘anti-artistic’ position consists in the appropriation of the ‘ambient world’, which could be experienced by the public through participation. This would provoke ‘a fatal blow of the concept of the museum, art gallery etc.’⁸⁷ Oiticica initially

⁸⁵ See Hélio Oiticica, “Fundamental basis for the definition of the *Parangolé*” and “Notes on the *Prangolé*,” in Guy Brett et al, eds. *Hélio Oiticica*. (Rotterdam: Witte der With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1992), 85-88, 93-96.

⁸⁶ Hélio Oiticica, “Bases fundamentais para uma definição do *Parangolé*,” originally published by the artist, 1965, at the occasion of the exhibition *Opinião 65*, August 12-September 12, 1965, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, reprinted and translated in *Hélio Oiticica*, 87.

⁸⁷ Hélio Oiticica, “Environmental Program,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 103-104. Originally published in Hélio Oiticica, “*Parangolé: Da Anti-Arte as Apropriações Ambientais de Oiticica*,” *Revista GAM* (1967): 27-31.

performed his *Parangolés* in Mangueira, but he then tried to re-stage the event in the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, on the occasion of the exhibition *Opinião 65* (1965) [fig. 3.5]. The shift from one context to another produces an additional dichotomy among the kind of public who attended the performances, and to whom the message was addressed. Photographic documentation of the people of Mangueira wearing the *Parangolé* shows little or nothing of the audience attending these events; but in those few shots that do capture the audience, we can see a homogeneous local Afro-Brazilian population. This reduces the fracture between the participant and spectator on a social level but it makes apparent the gap between the artist and his ‘actors’ (Oiticica’s experience of the favela had not been as easy as much literature narrates).⁸⁸

Yet when Oiticica brings his *passistas* (samba dancer) friends, dancing within the *Parangolé* capes, into the institution of the museum the relation between participator and viewer inevitably changes, revealing the disjunction between the poorer masses relegated to the margins of society and the white, richer, bourgeoisie participating at the exhibition opening. Scholarly criticism has praised the *Parangolés* as an artistic medium capable of passing between several classes of society, enabling a social transformation and bridging the gap between, as Rodrigues da Silva puts it, ‘the artist and the spectator, the Afro-Brazilian and the white, the asphalt and the favela dwellers, the poor and the rich, and the non-educated and the erudite Cariocas’.⁸⁹ However, if we pay attention to the double nature of the audience – as identified on the basis of a semiological reading of the work – by reversing the perception from ‘looking’ to ‘being looked’, a strictly contingent issue emerges: the ‘spectacle’.

On a social level, *Parangolé*’s marginalised community turns into a ‘spectacle’ for the bourgeois viewer. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), rejecting the notion of ‘spectacle’, provocatively wrote: ‘Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance. ... We are neither in the amphitheatre

⁸⁸ On the matter between Oiticica’s relation with Mangueira see Michael Asbury, “Hélio Couldn’t Dance,” in Paula Braga, ed., *Fios Soltos: a Arte de Hélio Oiticica* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2008) 27-65.

⁸⁹ Rodrigues da Silva, “Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolé,” 231.

nor on the stage but in the Panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power.’⁹⁰ Foucault draws the issue of forced viewership – here mostly considered according to the passive status of being viewed and subjected to an external gaze – into a system of power relations. Although I do not agree with Foucault’s assumption that ‘spectacle’ and ‘surveillance’ are incompatible structures, the power relations he identifies are at stake in Oiticica’s *Parangolés*.⁹¹ Da Silva and many others recall that Oiticica and the participants carrying *Parangolé* banners were ejected from the museum at the opening of *Opinião 65* [fig. 3.6]. This episode prompts a twofold consideration: it is evidence of the transgressive and shocking quality of the *Parangolés*, yet it also underlines the gap between a socio-cultural and ethnic minority and the élitist bourgeoisie. Da Silva observes:

At the main entrance of the museum, however, the group was forbidden to enter. A journalist described the incident: ‘We comment on the fact that the MAM staff had not authorised the exhibition of “environmental art” at all. The performance of the *passistas* headed by Héli Oiticica in the interior of the museum was not possible for reasons we could not understand: the noise of drums, tambourines and frying pans.’ Outraged by the incident, Oiticica and the *Parangolé* performers, followed by the guests at the opening, stepped outside. Oiticica then made a harsh but well-received speech against the institution.’⁹²

Is it not my intention here to develop ‘Oiticica’s arguable appropriation of blackness’, his unwilling ‘spectacularisation’ and ‘commercialisation’ of a specific social class further – since it is a slightly anachronistic discourse – but rather to encourage a discussion that highlights contrasts within the wealth of recent literature.⁹³ Scholars indeed have unconditionally paid tribute to

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 217, quoted in McGrath, “Body, Subject, Self,” 114.

⁹¹ Both the spectacle and a situation of surveillance implied an ‘objectified subject’ and a situation of ‘captivity’; I therefore see them as complementary structures.

⁹² Rodrigues da Silva, “Héli Oiticica’s *Parangolé*,” 230.

⁹³ My argument here draws intentionally upon Abigail Lapin Dardashti’s paper ‘Creating a Black Presence in Brazil: Miguel Rio Branco in Salvador da Bahia, 1970s’ delivered at the conference ‘Possibilities of Exchange: Experiments in Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art’, Edinburgh College of Art and The Fruitmarket Gallery, 13th-14th of May 2015. Lapin Dardashti affirms that ‘through a return to traditional media, artist-activists also set themselves apart from artists such as Helio Oiticica who explored the shifting boundaries of the object in the 1970s with works like *Parangolés*. While Oiticica arguably appropriated blackness, artists associated with civil rights like photographer Miguel Rio Branco returned to the colonial Baroque in order to challenge the folkloric

Oiticica's empowering of the masses, dismissing further meanings that the aforementioned pairing of contraries adds to the work. The 'ambiguous' character of the *Parangolé* needs to be problematised and reflected upon.

3.1 The 'Magic Base' and the 'Living sculptures': between 'bodily reification' and the 'spectacle'

Unfolding a similar process, Eco's open model illuminates the contradiction at stake in Manzoni's dealing with the public, although participation in Manzoni's works assumes different connotations from Oiticica's. The Italian artist pays a great deal of attention to the 'body', associating it with themes concerning not only the spectacle, but also the relation of the subject and author. Yet he enacts a mode of engaging with the audience quite opposed to Oiticica's. It has been already emphasised how Manzoni deals with the 'body', particularly with his own body, merchandising its traces. It is not my intention here to undermine this interpretation, but rather to propose a more nuanced view. Manzoni is not only interested in the 'body' as such, but in the 'body' as performing a role. At the same time, the artist aims to disrupt the canonical opposition between activation of the audience and passive spectatorial consumption.

This is particularly evident in the staging of *Nutrimenti d'arte di P. Manzoni. Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico Divorare l'arte* (*Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Public. Devouring Art*), held for the first time at the Gallery Azimut in Milan on 21 June, 1960. The latter was the first Happening ever realised in Italy: Manzoni signed approximately one hundred hard-boiled eggs with his fingerprint and invited the public to eat them.⁹⁴ The audience passively ate the eggs 'consecrated' by the artist with his signature; at the same time the public played an active function in validating these eggs as works of art. The role that the public performed in Manzoni's work reflects

portrayal of black identity.' While it is not of my competence to enter into the merits of the argument around Rio Branco, I very much welcome the provocation on Oiticica.

⁹⁴ Manzoni never referred to *Consumption of Art* as a 'happening'. Here I am deliberately appropriating a US-born terminology to describe the performance.

Eco's theory, according to which a work of art does not exist *a priori* but needs to be activated by a 'reader'.

The aim of this section is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to challenge current scholarly criticism that analyses this body of works only in terms of Theodor Adorno's model of alienation and to embrace instead Eco's aesthetics as an open hermeneutical model. Secondly, places Manzoni's work within a transnational perspective, by comparing and contrasting it with radical artistic experiments outside the mainstream Anglophone view.

From 1961 until his death, Manzoni placed his signature on spectators' bodies, conceptually providing a metamorphosis of the self into a 'work of art'. This transformation was certified by a bilingual *Carta d'Autenticità* (*Authenticity Card*) [fig. 3.7] with coded stamps of various colours, corresponding to various degrees of 'being a work of art'.⁹⁵ The first staging of this work, the signing of Handy Stoppani and Clara Siviero in January 1961, was recorded for the Cinegiornale SEDI of Giampaolo Maccentelli, with whom Manzoni had previously collaborated.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the short newsreel has been lost, and only the photographic documentation by Giuseppe Bellone survives [fig. 3.8].⁹⁷ During the same year, Manzoni performed the signing of models again at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome. In continuity with these works, Manzoni created the *Basi Magiche* (*Magic Bases* 1961). The first *Magic Base* had the tag 'Living Sculpture' as a subtitle and constituted a trapezoidal prism displaying footprints on its top surface [fig. 3.9]. The footprints were 'arranged at an angle to one another, the left foot straight

⁹⁵ Red indicated that the individual was a complete work of art and would remain as such until his death. Yellow was valid only for the part signed, which was indicated in writing on the card. The color green was limited to behavior and one was a work of art only in given positions: for example drinking or singing. The color purple had the identical functions as red only it was paid for. Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs," 147.

⁹⁶ G.P. Maccentelli, e P. Finocchi, 'Aeree sfere di gomma per opere d'arte' ('Surfaces and Spheres of Rubber for Artworks'), *Filmgiornale SEDI*, n 1020, happening n4, December 1959; 'Le lunghe linee' (The Long Lines'), *Filmgiornale SEDI*, n 1021, happening n5, December 1959; 'Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico Divorare l'arte' ('Consumption of art Dynamic of the public Devour art'). This translation has been made by Francesca Pola, 2013. I would like to suggest a slightly modified one: Consumption of Dynamic art by the public. Devouring art, *Filmgiornale SEDI*, July 1960; 'Sculpture viventi' ('Living sculptures'), *Filmgiornale SEDI*, January 1961.

⁹⁷ Photographs of the *Sculpture viventi* have been taken also by Uliano Lucas, Giovanni Ricci and Øle Bagger.

forward, the right slightly behind and slanted off to the side – perhaps to encourage a decorous pose befitting a classical figure’.⁹⁸

Umberto Eco was the last *Living Sculpture* signed by Manzoni.⁹⁹ The choice of analysing Manzoni’s ‘participatory’ works under Eco’s semiology therefore goes beyond an aesthetic necessity: it has an historical foundation. Indeed, Eco’s *Open Work* provided the theoretical basis for the *Gruppo 63*, a prominent literary and artistic neo-avant-garde group in northern Italy. It is likely that *Gruppo 63* – particularly the poets and writers Nanni Balestrini, Elio Pagliarini and Antonio Porta – acted as an intermediary between Eco and Manzoni. The two met in the intellectual Milanese scene around the neighbourhood of Brera, but there is no reliable documentation of this encounter with the exception of Eco’s brief recollection.¹⁰⁰ It is unlikely that Manzoni read the *Open Work* that was published that same year, and there is no proof that testifies he was acquainted with semiotics. However, two considerations must be acknowledged here.

Firstly, the essay ‘The problem of the Open Work’ by Eco appeared for the first time at the XII International Congress of Philosophy, Venice, 1958 and it was published in the conference proceedings in 1961.¹⁰¹ Manzoni, who had been studying philosophy at the University for a year could have come across it. Secondly, from the artist’s readings, it can be hypothesised that Manzoni was aware of Luigi Pareyson’s *Estetica: Teoria della Formatività* (‘Aesthetics: Theory of Formation’ 1960) upon which Eco establishes his

⁹⁸ McGrath, “Body, Subject, Self,” 178.

⁹⁹ On June 2, 1962. See Martin Engler, ‘The body, its image, its actions and objects,’ in Martin Engler, ed., *Piero Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art* (Stäedel Museum: Frankfurt am Main, 2013) 33.

¹⁰⁰ This hypothesis comes from a conversation the author had with art historian Gregory Tentler. Umberto Eco wrote: ‘Brera was a Montmatre, a Montparnasse, a Greenwich Village, where things happened at an accelerated pace, because the lost years had to be made up and the new freedom, the chance to attempt every adventure and every experience, enjoyed. I arrived in Brera after this heroic period, but many of its main figures were still there. Joe Colombo, Enrico Baj, and Sergio d’Angelo (...) I also met the masters of the previous generation, including Lucio Fontana, as well as the younger artists. Indeed, one day Piero Manzoni signed my wrist in indelible ink, as he did with certain friends to make them into works of art. The ink eventually faded, of course, even though for two weeks I didn’t wash my right arm. But this is a problem for some future restorer; I remain a certified work of art by Manzoni and I am happy he immortalized me that way instead of putting me inside one of his famous little boxes, Umberto Eco, “You must remember this,” in Germano Celant, ed., *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968* (Guggenheim Museum: New York; Progetti Museali: Roma, 1994) xiii.

¹⁰¹ Atti del Congresso, III (Firenze: Sansoni) 1961, 139.

argument on the openness of contemporary works.¹⁰² From Manzoni's juvenile diary (1954-1955), it can be noted that a deep interest in Benedetto Croce went alongside the fascination with Kierkegaard and Existentialism that ultimately gained the upper hand.¹⁰³ Indeed, as explained by Eco, 'in Croce's view, was not possible; a coincidence between the unity of the work and the multiplicity of its executions' which had, on the contrary, been enabled by Pareyson.¹⁰⁴ Ideas of 'polysemy' and 'execution' – already discussed in relation to Oiticica's work – become very pertinent to Manzoni's practice.

Manzoni's *Magic Base* 'stands as a work of radical incompleteness' that requires a physical participation: it is a base without a sculpture that demands the spectator to jump upon it to be completed – the footprints as well as the *Living Sculpture* subtitle can be read as the 'instructions' of the work. The relation between aesthetic and physical fruition required by the work has the illusory potentiality of empowering the audience, freed from a passive contemplative position bequeathed by Modernism. The spectator's body also is brought to the fore also when labelled as *Living Sculpture*. During this process – similar to a mystical transubstantiation – the participant shifts from the mortal condition of being a 'human' to the transcendence status of becoming a

¹⁰² The importance of Pareyson and Existentialism for the artist has been discussed in Flaminio Gualdoni and Silvia Mascheroni, eds., *Miracoli a Milano. 1955–1965. Artisti gallerie tendenze* (Museo della Permanente: Milano, 2000) 31 and in Jacopo Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne," *Oxford Art Journal*, 35 (2012) 81.

¹⁰³ Explicit references to existentialism and Sartre can be found all over Manzoni's diary. In particular, on 13 April 1954, Manzoni writes that he is about to finish his reading of 'the little book on existentialism by Prini, in its part on Sartre'. Manzoni is alluding to the volume by Pietro Prini, *Esistenzialismo* (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 1952). The book is divided into four sections and sub-sections. Part One. Biography of romantic existentialism: 1. Kierkegaard, a witness of the suffering truth; 2. Nietzsche or the fidelity to destiny; 3. Dostoevsky or the compassion toward life; 4. Kafka, a stranger in the city of men. Part two. The great themes of metaphysical existentialism: 1. The transcendence of truth and the sinking of reason; 2. The existence threatened and the fall into alienation. Part Three. The humanistic resolution of existentialism: 1. Jean-Paul Sartre and the dialectic of total and useless freedom; 2. The positive existentialism of Nicola Abbagnano. Part Four. Critical epilogue: 1. Existentialism or the iconoclasts of immanence. See Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone (Milano: Electa and Fondazione Piero Manzoni, 2013) 61, 185. Regarding Manzoni and Kierkegaard see also the interview where Manzoni defines Kierkegaard his putative father, originally published on the Herning Folkeblad, 6 July 1960 and translated into Italian and English by Jacopo Galimberti, "Piero Manzoni a Herning: 'Non sono un pittore sono un teorico dialettico'," *Palinsesti*, vol.1, (2013): 48-53. References to Benedetto Croce can be found at pp. 129, 203-4 of Manzoni's diary.

¹⁰⁴ 'Nella prospettiva crociana non era possibile la coincidenza tra l'unità dell'opera e la molteplicità delle sue esecuzioni' Umberto Eco, *La Definizione dell'Arte* (Milan: Marsia, 1968), 20.

‘work of art’. Moreover, standing on a base, the participant’s body is intentionally placed in a position of authority, superior to the surrounding audience and the artist itself. Yet, by reversing the perception, the *Living Sculptures* are at the mercy of both author and spectator. Therefore, I shall analyse this body of works under different parameters: the reification of the body and the spectacle.

Issues around the ‘reification of the body’ in Manzoni’s practice have been already acknowledged in the critical literature. The art historian John Thomas McGrath embraces an Adornian standpoint and discusses the artist’s satirical ‘objectification’ of the human body in terms of commodity and alienation.¹⁰⁵ He understands these works as ready-mades: according to his thesis, Manzoni appropriates the human body just as Duchamp had previously exhibited ordinary objects in a gallery space. A similar position has been taken up by Francisco Calvo Serraller, who unravels Manzoni’s ‘participatory’ works under a Marxist perspective, as an internal critique of the contemporary capitalistic economic system. He affirms:

Ironically suppressing the separation between artist and work of art (and also between the spectator and the work of art), Manzoni demystified the purely modernist belief that artistic work is a non-alienated labour. He recognised that the aesthetic object, and by extension famous artists, had become like everything else in the post-war capitalistic economy a reified commodity.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, Serraller does not explain *how* this critique comes to the fore or the kind of participatory processes at stake in these works. Furthermore, the reading of the *Living Sculptures* as bodily ready-mades is quite reductive. The Marxist interpretation of these works as critique of capitalist society – and its debunking of the art object to a mere commodity fetish – is, if not misleading, at the least somewhat limited. The reification of the body in Manzoni’s oeuvre

¹⁰⁵ See McGrath, “Body, Subject, Self”.

¹⁰⁶ ‘sopprimendo ironicamente la separazione tra artista e opera d’arte (e anche tra spettatore e opera d’arte), Manzoni demistificò la credenza prettamente moderna che il lavoro artistico sia lavoro non alienato. Riconobbe che l’oggetto estetico, e per estensione l’artista famoso, era divenuto come tutto il resto nell’economia capitalista del dopoguerra, una merce reificata.’ Francisco Calvo Serraller, “Dire, Essere, Vivere,” in Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni* (Milan: Electa, 1992) 43, my translation.

discloses the possibility of being analysed under multiple perspectives. It can be seen as a challenge to physical participation *ante litteram* and it originates from the artist's interest in science and science fiction, made visible in the double nature of his artistic corpus, always in between the 'organic' and the 'synthetic'.¹⁰⁷

The first *Magic Base* can be described as a 'site of agency' that demands to be performed; the *Living Sculptures* exploit the body of the spectator and simultaneously, through the medium of the film, making possible the ideal infinite extension of the audience. However both retain traces of the artist's subjectivity and its authoritarian position – seemingly in contrast with the ideas of 'cheerful participation' and 'empathetic axis'. Yet, if the audience's creative action is only apparent – as it performs already constructed situations – concurrently its conceptual awareness increases. Manzoni's satirical approach cannot be explained as 'an evil nihilistic attitude', but rather as a 'constructive will' bursting out of an extreme experimental position and hidden under the veil of irony.¹⁰⁸

Manzoni's *Living Sculptures* can be related to the production of two other artists left out of the mainstream Anglophone art histories: Alberto Greco's *Vivo Ditos* (*Living Fingers*, from 1959) [fig. 3.10] and Oscar Bony's *La Familia Obrera* (*The Worker's Family*, 1986) [fig. 3.11]. It is interesting how Alberto Greco's practice almost works as 'mediator' between Manzoni's and Oiticica's ways of engaging with participation. The Argentinian artist had lived in Brazil in the 1950s, where he became acquainted with *Informal* painting, experimenting with materials in a way that is similar to Manzoni's Nuclear paintings. Greco travelled around Europe and Italy in the early 1960s where he staged extremely provocative and blasphemous Happenings that to some extent recall those of Jean-Jacques Lebel.

At the same time, Greco's conception of 'open' artistic experience is entangled with both Oiticica's notion of 'environmental art' based on

¹⁰⁷ This duality as well as Manzoni's interest in science and science fiction is evident since his earlier Nuclear works. Cf. the manifesto 'Towards an organic painting' signed by Manzoni together with Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga, June 1957.

¹⁰⁸ See McGrath, "Body, Subject, Self."

‘propositions’ and Manzoni’s derisive mockeries of the artist and its audience. By drawing circles with chalk on the streets, Greco was pointing to things – not only human beings – to be declared works of art. His manifesto reads:

Vivo-Dito is the adventure of reality, an urgent document, a direct and consummate contact with things. It is existence in places, in human beings, in unforeseen situations. It is the demonstration and encounter with an object at its innate place. A living document in the sense of film, reporting and literature. I am interested in the real object without a retouching, without artistic transformation. Some living being that relates its own life on the street or in the tram counts more than any technical, polished story written by a writer.¹⁰⁹

The practice of including anything in the realm of art by simply using the finger is strikingly similar to Manzoni’s gesture. What differs is the context – open air spaces versus gallery or studio settings – as well as the use of media. Indeed, as emphasised above, Manzoni did the first signing of the *Living Sculptures* in front of the camera, and in the photographic documentation the artist is always acting as an actor on the stage.

The ‘spectacularisation’ of the human, its body in particular, can be analysed as closer to Oscar Bony’s *La Familia Obrera* (1968). This work was shown for the first time in the exhibition ‘Experiencias ‘68’ at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, Buenos Aires: it consisted of a working class family – mother, father, son – sitting on a platform for eight hours a day. The following label accompanied this piece: ‘Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, a professional die-caster, is earning twice his usual wages for just staying on show with his wife and son.’¹¹⁰ Denouncing the underpayment of the working class, Bony’s *La Familia Obrera* has a defined political dimension. From an aesthetic perspective, the work pushes to its limits the avant-garde tradition of blurring the boundaries between art and life.

Bishop and other critics have marked two controversial issues at stake in this work: it took place in a museum – working as institutional critique on the one

¹⁰⁹ *Arte Vivo-Dito Manifiesto*. Alberto Greco, Genoa, July 24, 1962 (11.30 a.m.) Reproduced in Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Vivencias*, 154.

¹¹⁰ Oscar Bony quoted in Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 113.

hand, but being subjected to its regulations on the other – and it was directed towards a middle class audience, fetishising the conditions of a working class family. Bishop argues:

Although the family is literally and symbolically elevated, they are also subjected to the scrutiny of a primary middle class audience who come to view them, as installation shots make clear: a well-to-do family of three inspect the shorter, less well-dressed family, who avert their gaze.¹¹¹

The process of inverting the perspective and its results are comparable to the outcomes of performing Oiticica's *Parangolés* in the museum; the work's potentially shocking power takes the risk of being institutionalised. At the same time, the 'appropriation' of minorities – the afro-Brazilian inhabitants of the favelas in the case of Oiticica and the working class for Bony – risks being commodified, making a spectacle of the vernacular.

Despite the way in which both artists disrupt the equation between participation and emancipation, a sociological dimension does not exist in Manzoni's oeuvre: the audience taking part in his *Living Sculptures* is really mixed, from celebrities, to normal galleries attendees, to paid models. There are a few other key differences in comparison to Bony's work. Firstly, Manzoni gets paid by the participant to release the *Authenticity Cards* – only the ones with a purple stamp – while Bony pays the participants to perform the role of being themselves. Yet in doing so, he denies the supposed 'spontaneity' claimed by much participatory art and theory. Secondly, Bony's work still possesses a modernist utopian stance, not only in its attempt to merge art and life but also in the social critique that the work seeks to embrace and display – the low paid working class labour – that makes the author unaware of the danger of sliding into the dimension of the spectacle. Manzoni, on the contrary, adopts a glaringly cynical attitude: using the media to his own ends, he deliberately constructs 'spectacular' situations, and therefore in contrast to Guy Debord's attempt to defeat the spectacle, as I am going to address.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 114.

Art historian Francesca Pola has recently stressed Manzoni's 'powerful filmic capacity', enhancing the artist's attention to the communicative process that is connected to how the work is transmitted and received, as well as to the 'mythologising' of his persona.¹¹² However, little or no attention has been paid to the connection between bodily participation and the spectacle, and to the sources for Manzoni's interest in a new visual dimension. Despite Bishop's criticism of using people as 'medium' and the consequent reification of their bodies as 'conservative', Manzoni's engagement with the audience pioneers a critique of participatory art that had yet to come.¹¹³

Even though the influential book *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La Société du Spectacle*) by Guy Debord was published in 1967 – four years after Manzoni's death – it can be hypothesised that the artist became familiar with the *Situationist International*'s theories and practices already in 1957 at Albisola Marina in Liguria. In the same year he sent a letter to Lebel and Ralph Rumney to invite them to take part in a protest against the conservative critical establishment – a protest that in the end was never realised.¹¹⁴ Equally, in a letter to Enrico Baj, Manzoni mentions Debord, stressing that he had found 'Debord's little book interesting'.¹¹⁵ It has been suggested that Manzoni was referring to *Rapport sur la construction de situations*, published in 1957 when the *Lettrist International* was replaced by the SI, advancing the novel idea of 'constructed situation'.¹¹⁶ The text reads:

¹¹² See Francesca Pola, "Manzoni in Film: the Immaterial Body of the Idea," in Martin Engler, ed., *Piero Manzoni*, 157-216.

¹¹³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 115.

¹¹⁴ 'Baj and I have decided to organize, here in Milan, a remarkable and violent protest against the art criticism, particularly against some of its aspects. Particularly here in Italy, there are no critics able to propose the beginning for a new poetic: these individuals are mainly caring about doing 'journalistic chronicles': but they also dare to give artistic judgements, fallacious most of the time, but still dangerous, given the influence these newspapers have on the audience. Those deliberately against every avant-garde action are to a certain extent 'honest': dangerous are those who pretend to adopt 'modern attitudes', without absolutely no understanding of the reasons of our practices. [...] This will be a serious event, it will cause a scandal, with police action etc...: we wrote to Jorn and Klein: let me know as soon as possible if we can rely on you. The matter will have to be truly colossal,' Piero Manzoni, letter addressed to Enrico Baj, June 1957, quoted in Francesca Gramegna, "Una grossa e violenta manifestazione contro la critica d'arte": il carteggio fra Enrico Baj e Piero Manzoni nella Milano degli anni Cinquanta," *ARTES* 13 (2005-2007) 9-10.

¹¹⁵ Manzoni, Letter to Enrico Baj, June 1957, *Ibid*.

¹¹⁶ See Jacopo Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool," 79.

Integral art, which has been talked about so much, [...] can no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories. [...] The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle — non-intervention — is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing "public" must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, "livers," must steadily increase.¹¹⁷

When Manzoni realised his *Living Sculptures* a few years later, he had arguably already reached a stage of complete disillusionment towards the possibility of 'constructing collective situations' in order to prevent and contrast the alienation caused by the increasing capitalisation of society. To a certain extent, this body of works seemed to be realised by Manzoni in deliberate opposition to Debord's critique of the 'spectacle' or his utopic communitarian aspect, preferring a one-to-one relationship between author and user. Yet the artist still maintained the refusal of traditional aesthetic categories as pivotal in his practice: the reification of the human body is part of this strain. In contrast with a left-wing approach and in antagonism with the increasing collective character of recent art and literature, Manzoni didn't believe in the 'democratising' power ascribed to the arts by many of his contemporaries; he therefore wants to address the fallibility of art in having social impact in his work through the construction of spectacular situations constituted by acting participants.

In 1962 Julio Le Parc (who belonged to the Group de Recherch d'Art Visuelle) published a pamphlet titled *A propos de art-spectacle, spectateur actif, instabilité et programmation dans l'art visual*. At first glance, Manzoni's attitude towards the 'spectacle' seems close to Le Parc's. The pamphlet reads:

¹¹⁷ Rapport sur la construction des situations" was one of the preparatory texts for the July 1957 conference at Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, at which the Situationist International was founded. This translation by Ken Knabb is from the "Situationist International Anthology" (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006), accessed July 5, 2015, URL: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>.

In the same order, and with a concern of spectacle, taking the spectator-active as object of contemplation (during that he participates in a art work, he becomes the object of the spectacle), leads to simultaneous existence of a spectator who lives the creation with conscience to be observed and of a spectator who contemplates it.¹¹⁸

Yet Le Parc advocates the reconciliation between the ‘spectacle’ and the audience, inverting the ‘contemplative situation of the spectator in favour of his active participation’ and establishing ‘the degree of such evolution’.¹¹⁹ Notably, Le Parc describes a process of reciprocal fruition between the work of art and its user that is strikingly similar to Eco’s, affirming that the spectator is ‘intended to recompose indefinitely, in the same work, a multitude of works to passive contemplation’ and that the author can be qualified as ‘producer of transformable works’.¹²⁰ According to Le Parc, this passive contemplation is not a situation of surveillance, where the spectator is kept in captivity, but rather it allows his active participation.

No doubt, Manzoni shares with Le Parc the will of naturalising the spectacle in the art world and the possibility of increasing the conceptual awareness of the spectator as a form of participation. Yet Manzoni exploits the situation of the ‘spectacle’ further. In aligning himself with the spectacle’s principle of non-intervention, Manzoni reveals the inner failure and the illusory character of a bodily form of participation – a critical position never reached neither by Le Parc nor by Debord. The audience, either signed and transformed as a *Living Sculpture* or brought to prominence by standing on a *Magic Base*, is still relegated by the artist to a passive corollary position.

Manzoni’s ridiculing of the necessity of a ‘living public’ is an extreme attitude, as attested in a letter to the artist Ben Vautier: ‘For the other, I thought of sealing them in parallelepipeds in transparent plastic material; they die (naturally) and stay there, and you can see them and laugh at them.’¹²¹ This is a clearly hyperbolised provocation. It seems according to this analysis that

¹¹⁸ Julio Le Parc, “Concerning the Art-Spectacle, Active Spectator, Instability and programming in visual art,” September 1962, accessed July 15, 2015, URL: <http://www.julioleparc.org/tablet/a-propos.html>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Piero Manzoni, letter to Ben Vautier quoted in John Thomas McGrath, “Body, Subject, Self,” 190.

Manzoni adopts a nihilist stance that denies the ‘constructive will’ claimed above. Yet it is not the case. The Italian curator Germano Celant proposes a different interpretation. In the 1975 general catalogue of Manzoni’s works, Celant qualifies the signing of the *Living Sculptures* as a ‘gesture of love’:

With the *Bases*, unlike the “predatory” attitude shared by Kaprow, Whitman, Oldenburg and Klein, who “appropriated” the bodies for actions and gestures with anterior and outwards ends to the bodies themselves, Manzoni makes a “gesture of love”; he doesn’t use but enhances the body and the individual as living sculpture.¹²²

At a later stage, the critic slightly modifies his position but still attributes to the *Living Sculptures* an utopian stance that deals with the desire of being ‘immortal’:

These proposals, from the construction of robots to the ‘preservation of dead people in transparent plastic blocks’ must not appear as ‘inhuman’, as they are linked to a different notion of time which, being linear and organic, should continue to exist, passing from life to death until reaching immortality.¹²³

While the Marxist interpretation of these works as a blatant attack on the capitalistic system of production is problematic, Celant’s analysis sounds rather hagiographic, if not misleading. In fact it comes closer to that inextricable connection between ‘democracy’, ‘empathy’ and participatory art proclaimed by Kester.

Despite the dismissal of a collective utopic community of participants, by opening the work to the public Manzoni seeks to create a balance between a passive participatory model and an increase of conceptual awareness. The

¹²² ‘Con le basi, a differenza dell’atteggiamento “predatorio” di Kaprow, Whitman, Oldenburg e Klein, che si “appropriano” dei corpi per azioni e per gesti con fini anteriori e posteriori agli stessi corpi, Manzoni compie un “gesto d’amore”; non usa, ma esalta, il corpo e l’individuo, come sculture vive.’ Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale* (Milan: Prearo, 1975) 55, my translation.

¹²³ “Tali proposte, dalla costruzione di Robot alla ‘conservazione di persone morte in blocchi di plastica trasparente non devono apparire disumane, poiché esse sono legate a una diversa nozione di tempo che, essendo lineare e organico, deve continuare a esistere, passando dalla vita alla morte, sino all’immortalità.” Germano Celant, “Piero Manzoni un Artista del Presente,” in *Piero Manzoni*, 14, my translation.

audience member is indeed enabled by the artist to have an unmediated experience of the work of art by being a work of art himself. At the same time, by standing on the pedestal of the *Magic Base* or being signed as *Living Sculpture* and thus changing into the object of spectacle, the participant becomes conscious of the limitation of participatory art practice itself.

4. Conclusion

The work [of art] is something more than its year of birth, its antecedents or interpretations made on it. And how it is ‘something more’ is usually explained when it comes to a crucial ‘opening’ or ‘ambiguity’ or ‘plurisigness’ of the work – meaning that the work of art is a matter of communication that asks to be interpreted and then completed and supplemented by the ratio of the user.¹²⁴

Manzoni’s and Oiticica’s work originates from the conceptual idea of ‘zero’. Engaging with anti-aesthetic and anti-artistic strategies, both artists ‘zeroed’ what came before them, retaining elements from the past in a constant experimental evolution. Eco’s open model is similarly timeless: allowing the coexistence of different readings in a work, it legitimates the continuous development of multiple meanings. The potentiality for a work to endlessly arise from scratch by re-arranging its structure and system of significances also has a cultural specificity, grounded in the post-war desire of reconstruction and in the will of post-colonial emancipation.

The adoption of Eco’s hermeneutical model establishes almost a dichotomy between the two artists. On the matter of including the audience in the work of art, weakening the boundaries between art and life and eroding the authoritarian position of the artist, a utopic and democratic stance is contrasted with a ‘dystopian’ nearly derisive attitude.

¹²⁴ ‘L’opera d’arte è qualcosa di più del suo anno di nascita, dei suoi antecedenti e dei giudizi formulati su essa. E in che modo sia ‘qualcosa di più’ viene spiegato di solito quando si parla di una fondamentale ‘apertura’ o ‘ambiguità’ o ‘polisegnicità’ di un’opera – intendendo con questo che l’opera d’arte costituisce un fatto comunicativo che chiede di essere interpretato, e quindi integrato, completato da un rapporto del fruitore,’ Umberto Eco, “Note sui limiti dell’estetica,” in *La definizione dell’arte*, 61, my translation.

What is at stake in the analysis of both Manzoni's and Oiticica's participatory practice is that their work, being structurally open, demands execution by the audience but remains deliberately ambiguous. Their polysemic character is evident not only in the delivering of multiple meanings but also in the twofold modes of experience allowed: a physical and a conceptual form of participation. Consequently, the audience that takes part in this reciprocal relation of fruition assumes a twofold role. The spectator who bodily experiences the work becomes a 'participant' or, as Eco names it, a 'performer'; the spectator who contemplates and engages with the work only from an intellectual perspective becomes the 'viewer' or 'user'.

In Oiticica this duality reflects the 'appropriation' of an ethnic minority, the *passistas* of Mangueira, to be objectified by the gaze of the white bourgeoisie. Despite the utopic democratic intent, his practice unwillingly slides into making a 'spectacle of the vernacular', emphasising the gap not only between the author and the performer, but also between the performer and the user. While in Oiticica the bodily participatory experience is enacted by the wearing of the work and the act of dancing, Manzoni privileges a condition of 'stillness'. Yet he seeks to create a balance between the reification of the body of the participator and the increase of conceptual awareness of both the performer and the viewer. If Oiticica's work is involuntarily subjected to the dimension of the spectacle, Manzoni constructs spectacular situations, using photographic and filmic media to criticise participation itself. Manzoni retains an intellectual form of engagement as fundamental in his practice but dismantles the ideas of 'empathy' and 'emancipation', pivotal in Oiticica's work, and challenges the participation of the public in the work of art itself.

Illustrations

Fig. 3.3 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Deposizione dalla croce* (Deposition), da Rosso Fiorentino (*La Ricotta*, 1963)

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APOCALIPOPTESIS (APOCALIPOPTESE)

Once, last May (1968), during a beautiful Rio afternoon, in my house, after some hours talking about all sorts of problems, mainly the relations of general human behaviour and creative processes, my friend Rogerio Duarte formulated something that for him would express the process which took place then in the way many problems were put on, creative ones, mainly in the relation between the "work of art" or the "work" simply and the artist, in our group of experimental artists in Rio. In fact he referred mainly to my evolution (the Eden idea beginning definitely with the B57, Bolide bed 1), in all its anarchic sense and the way I put in check the idea of a "work", preferring the idea of a "proposition" instead, replacing even the "open work idea", expressed before by me (Bolides, mainly), somewhat alike Eco's idea but with the differences that should be looked for, mainly because I ignored Eco's theory of the open work when I already confronted it, in my early evolution. But Rogerio's vision was not only concentrated on me, but in another very important experimental Brazilian artist, ignored by my country's idiosyncrasy (except, I should say, by Frederico Morais, a young critic that has done justice to her), called Ligia Pape, whose experiments named Eggs were that day in my house, for some reason, and that called Rogerio's keen attention. This formulation he named as probject, which turned out for me as a very important concept, for it surpassed the idea of the object as an open structure, as in the beginning of some of our rehearsals-researches, to the potential grouping of the 'probabilities of the object', but here the idea of object itself is ambivalent, very different from its original source: the object is a probability, not the result of one probability, but the potentiality for a probability, that can be many - here the probability is a collective term that can turn out into many things, a generic term for a come out in the future, not a closed term in itself. Each possibility, inside n ones, would manifest in time and space in a special 'opened way': for instance, Ligia Pape's Eggs and my bed-bolide would be an Apocalipopotesis (there is no reason for explaining the choices of names, for that too is up to an opened signification field) # - another two cabins I was planning for the Eden would be Drogen (a hallucinopen participation, etc.), etc. I want to put very clearly that the concept of probject is not a "new name" for a new kind of objects in the art world, but rather a theoretical meaning, referring to a 'process' of creation and a vision of life, away from all aestheticist ambition to create new names, or too much concerned with latest news of art, and all that sort of stuff; so, we can never say: "this is a probject", referring to a piece of work. For me that concept is very good, and came just in time, because it has to do with the new ideas related to the "work" or "work of art", into which I bumped myself: the distrust of the concept of work, as it has always been known, although in modern art it has suffered many transformations, radical ones, mine is different: the representation of a "work" as the realization of an idea, although it could be very opened structurally, is an old way of seeing and feeling; I would rather concentrate the creative process into what in Portuguese I call "vivências", and that I translate sometimes as "feelings", but that is not an exact term, unless some explanations were made along with its quotation: they are very specific feelings, that rise with the ideas themselves and the participation in those ideas as they are communicated into propositions: they would be open feelings,

Fig. 3.2 Hélio Oiticica, *Apocalipopotesis*, 1969. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica.



Fig. 3.3 Mosquito da Mangueira wears Hélio Oiticica, *P10 Capa 6 "Homenagem a Mosquito da Mangueira"* during the exhibition "Manifestação Ambiental N. 1., Galeria G4, Rio de Janeiro, 1966. Photo by Claudio Oiticica, courtesy of César Oiticica.



Fig. 3.4 Hélio Oiticica, *Miro da Magueira dances with P4 Parangolé Capa 1*, 1964. Photo by Desdemone Bardin, courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica

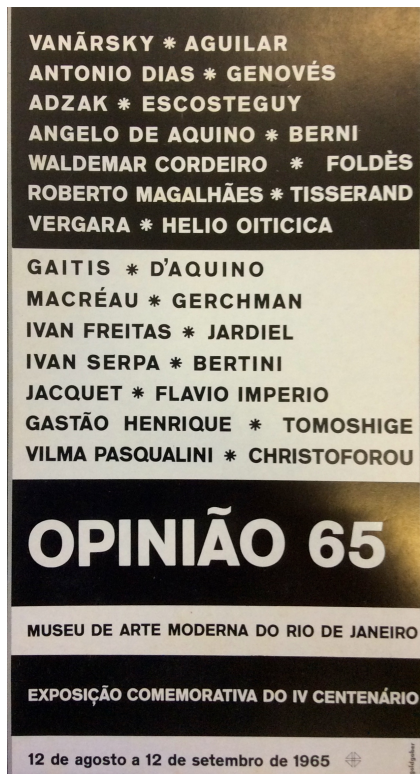


Fig. 3.5 Manifesto of the exhibition 'Opinião 65', 12 August – 12 September 1965, MAM RJ. Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro.



Fig. 3.6 Inauguration of the Parangolé outside of the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, August 12, 1965, Hélio Oiticica, *P2 Parangolé Bandeira 1* at center. Photo by Desdemone Bardin.

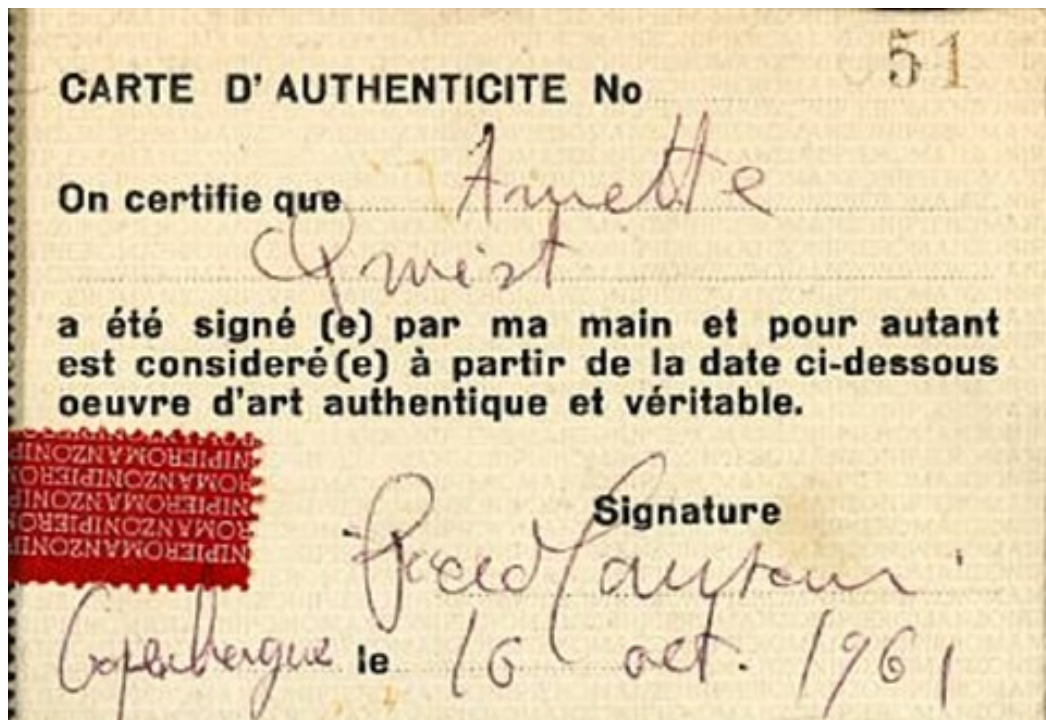


Fig. 3.7 Piero Manzoni, Carta d'autenticità, 1961, pre-printed receipt, 10 x 7 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 3.8 Piero Manzoni during the filming of the *Sculture viventi* action, Filmgiornale SEDI, in the studio of Giampaolo Maccentelli, 1961. Photo by Giuseppe Bellone.



Fig. 3.9 Piero Manzoni, *Base Magica – Scultura vivente*, 1961, wood, metal and felt, 79.5 x 79.5 x 60 cm. Piero Manzoni foundation.



Fig. 3.10 Alberto Greco circling Argentine artist Alberto Heredia with chalk as part of the *First Live Art* exhibition, Paris, March 1962. Courtesy Vanina Greco.



Fig. 3.11 Oscar Bony, *La Familia Obrera*, Instituto di Tella, 1968. Photographic documentation private collection.

Chapter 4

Art and Politics

Introduction

In 1963 the German-born art historian Edgar Wind published the little book *Art and Anarchy*, which deals with the public reception of art in relation to historical conditions. Wind sets his discussion within an extraordinarily broad frame, which includes philosophers Plato and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and the historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), to name a few. While the contemporary context in which the book was written in the sixties is not explicitly discussed, it is somehow present in the pages. With further reflection – and also overlooking its limited Eurocentric viewpoint and its recurrent lack of clarity– we can acknowledge this book, or at least its first chapter, as the premise for many art-historical discourses about the relation between art and politics in the present. The foundation of Wind's account on the state of arts relies on two assumptions: that the flourishing of great art has always coincided with situations of political turmoil and dissolution; and that the public's 'ever-increasing appetite for art [...] is matched by a progressive atrophy of the receptive organs'.¹ Accordingly, Wind surmises that art has lost its capacity to elicit that 'sacred fear' dreaded by Plato. The result of this loss leads Wind to the concept of 'art for art's sake', which is further discussed by the author in relation to the role of the artist.

Paraphrasing a passage from Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1835), Wind affirms that 'the absolute freedom of art, by which art can attach itself freely to any substance it chooses in order to exercise the imagination on it, has made the new artist a *tabula rasa* ... in a state of perpetual self-transformation'. Hegel defines this metamorphic process as '*unendliche Herumbildung*, an infinite plasticity'.² One of the consequences of relying on the assumption that 'art has

¹ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985) 8.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

lost its sting' is to embrace art as a 'pure' category. This is not my intention here. Arguably, the adoption of the term 'pure' is itself a paradox: art, as I will demonstrate, is always political. Yet, what strikes me as most important is to understand in what ways art is political, even if not necessarily because of its desired social engagement. If art has truly lost its sting, what is the purpose then of art historians considering its effectiveness on social grounds? This is the starting point of my discussion on Manzoni's and Oiticica's political engagement.

My stance runs parallel to that adopted by the art historian Claudia Calirman, who attempts not 'to speculate upon the successes or failures of these artistic endeavours ... [but] to outline the creation of new artistic paradigms that harnessed international practices to address a local political situation'.³ Moreover her insistence that 'a period rife with suspicion and censorship stimulated newly anarchic practices' corroborates Wind's assumption of the concurrence between the increase of cultural production and socio-political instability.⁴ Against this backdrop, my aim will be to unravel unresolved issues at stake between Manzoni's and Oiticica's practices and the socio-political context. In the first instance I shall investigate their socio-political backgrounds, considering the artistic practices of their contemporaries, as well as the influence of these on the two artists in question. Oiticica was deeply affected by socio-political turmoil and he took part in collective projects. Conversely, Manzoni did adopt a consciously anti-political position, refusing to align himself and his practice to a single party or to one of the contemporary political trends that influenced the majority of Milan-based artists in the sixties. This stance was corroborated by the artist's own words that testify to the dismissal of any political engagement.

Another key strand of my enquiry is 'the politics of making', i.e. the politics at stake in the making of the artwork and in the artist's gesture. In this respect I emphasise Oiticica's commitment to the figure of the anti-hero as well as the ambivalent position he adopts in respect to a nationally shared

³ Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 3.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

‘aesthetics of the margins’. In regard to Manzoni, I stress instead the significance of the politics at stake in dealing with notions of freedom – as influenced by philosophical readings – together with the artist’s exploration of originality and multiplicity. Finally, I focus on the ‘politics of the works’: that is to say on how the dismantling of the canonical notions of space and time displayed in Oiticica’s *Éden* and *Tropicália* and in Manzoni’s *Lines* reflects the anarchic attitude of both artists. As can be inferred from these premises, my argument in this chapter is articulated around the concept of ‘anarchy’, twisting and stretching its significance according to the point of view adopted.

The chapter is structured as follows: in sections one and two I will discuss Oiticica’s practice, firstly analysing the works *Tropicália* (1967) and *Éden* (1969) in light of an unconventional aesthetic standpoint that challenges a canonical understanding of place and time and subsequently shifting my attention to the issue of socio-political ‘marginality’ and contextualising the latter within a Brazilian ‘aesthetics of the margins’. In sections three and four I focus on Manzoni’s work. I start from his early political and philosophical ideals influenced by both philosophers Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) before going on to look at three series of works – the *Lines* (1959), the *Bodies of Air* (1959-1960) and the *Artist’s Shit* (1960) –, and the way in which these works interact with notions of freedom, infinity, originality and reproduction.

1. Hélio Oiticica’s *Tropicália* and *Éden*

Oiticica’s political commitment is evident on a twofold level, as a form of social engagement and as an aesthetic programme. Scholars Sabeth Bucham and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz maintain that ‘the *Cosmococas* aim at the dissolution of the powers of order represented by the prevailing regime of space and time, promising to establish closer solidarity among a scattered international community’.⁵ *Cosmococas* [fig. 4.1] are a series of multimedia

⁵ Sabeth Bucham, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, *Hélio Oiticica and Neville D’Almeida: Block-Experiments in Cosmococa-Program in Progress* (London: Afterall books, 2013), 48.

installations made in New York in the seventies, comprising slideshows projected on the walls of a room in which spectators are invited to sit on mattresses, or dance and play with various objects. This work aims to provide spectators with an active experience of the images screened on the walls, thus defying the logic of the spectacle that sees the audience subjected to a passive consumption of such materials. Often employing photos of celebrities, such as Jimi Hendrix and Marilyn Monroe whose somatic features are highlighted placing lines of cocaine on the picture, these works situate themselves ‘out of the law’ while assuming a political standpoint that offers a commentary on contemporaneous society. In this manner, the works reflect an intrinsic relation between Oiticica’s artistic position and his political views, thus validating the idea that a turbulent socio-political context necessarily reflects the dissolution of aesthetic categories. In fact, Oiticica’s unconventional political attitude had manifested even before the mixed media installations realised in New York in the seventies, particularly with regard to the shift between the staging of *Tropicália* at the MAM/RJ in 1967 and the *Whitechapel Experiment* in 1969, which witnessed the exhibition of both *Tropicália* and *Éden* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London [fig. 4.2].

Tropicália is a ‘structured space to walk through’, an environmental labyrinth consisting of two *Penetrables* – PN2 ‘*Purity is a Myth*’ and PN3 (1966-1967) – plants, sand, parrots, poem-objects, *Parangolé* capes and a television set.⁶ The audience participate in this work as they are assigned the task of entering into the installation. *Tropicália* presents images that are intended to invade the public’s senses of sight, touch, hearing and smell in order to convey a feeling of play and leisure. The appropriation of stereotypical connotations of Brazil aims to objectify such representations by ‘devouring’ the symbols of its culture. Indeed, as Oiticica affirms, *Tropicália* ‘is the most anthropophagic work of Brazilian art’ (‘é a obra mas antropofágica da arte

⁶ Christopher Dunn, “‘Experimental o Experimental’: Avant-Garde, Cultural Marginal, and Counterculture in Brazil, 1968-1972,” *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 50 (2013): 239.

brasileira’); the participant is assailed by the constant perception of being devoured.⁷

Tropicália materialises the ideas expressed by Oiticica in the ‘General Scheme of the New Objectivity’ (1966), which relates art to social change and ‘proposes an artistic engagement with political and ethical issues’.⁸ Accordingly, this work needs to be acknowledged as part of Oiticica’s socially engaged practice.⁹ Furthermore, through its experiments with colour and by integrating both everyday materials and television images, this installation strives to devise a typical Brazilian language that has an international appeal and that can ‘compete’ with the European avant-garde movements Pop and Op art.¹⁰ A comprehensive image of Brazil would be formed, according to the artist, only by appropriating European and North American elements into an indigenous context, thus creating ‘o mito da miscigenação’:¹¹

⁷ Hélio Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica*, (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Centre for Contemporary Art, 1992), 124.

⁸ Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art*, 83.

⁹ Lucian Figueiredo argues: ‘Nevertheless, I believe that *Tropicália*, in its profoundest meaning, is a political work, because it views the culture of Brazil in a total different way from the official and archaic colonial habits. It is not a difference that was manifested just one tragical political moment of Brazilian history. It is a difference we find at the core of Oiticica’s creations: subversion of a different kind, and idealisation of another order of Brazilian culture’ Luciano Figueiredo in Guy Brett and Luciano Figueiredo, *Oiticica in London* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 23. However, the critic fails to point out exactly what kind of subversion and idealisation Oiticica was aiming at, leaving the statement unsupported.

¹⁰ ‘Imagetical is a title that refers to the whole conception of *Tropicália*, as an environmental creation with a very obvious use of Brazilian images. It is a very sensorial experience too, but the proposition was primarily an exercise in images. Not an exercise of stereotypical Brazilian images. As Hélio himself pointed out many times, the idea of using images represented a reaction to all the clichéd imagery presented by American Pop Art that made use of typical American icons. Those cabins, constructions made with simple bare materials: sand, gravel, plant and the inclusion of a television, was an exercise of Brazilian images but not of typical Brazilian images. *Tropicália* has no relationship whatsoever to Brazilian folklore.’ See Luciano Figueiredo, *Oiticica in London*, 21. The complex relation between *Tropicália* and western/local imagery is better explained by curator Paulo V. Filho, who emphasises the differences between Pop art and *Tropicália* as the ability of the latter to resist consumerism: ‘*Tropicália* moves between the real city and the mythical city. It responds to and opposes pop art with its precariousness and lack of the ubiquitous Pop imagery of which an indispensable symbol was the permanently switched on television set, and caricatures the dominant cultural dispersal and evasion brought about by this medium. [...] *Tropicália* became an image, albeit one that could not be appropriated or consumed as one image’ Ibid., pp. 29-30, 32.

¹¹ ‘In Brazil, the hybrid was from the outset the basis of its culture, but it took time before the name was not spoken as a curse. Gilberto Freyre’s celebrated account of Brazilian culture, the *Masters and the Slaves*, begins with the confession ‘of all the problems confronting Brazil there was none that gave me so much anxiety as that of miscegenation’ Gilberto Freyre, quoted by Nikos Papastergiadis, “Restless Hybrids,” in Rasheed Araeen et al., eds., *The Third Text Reader, on Art, Culture and Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 167. In a footnote, Papastergiadis argues: ‘when referring to the general development of such a culture, Freyre does not speak of a process of hybridity, preferring the

For the creation of a true Brazilian culture, characteristic and strong, expressive at least, this accursed European and American influence will have to be absorbed, anthropophagically, by the black and Indian of our land, who are in reality the only significant ones, since most products of Brazilian art are hybrids, intellectualised to the extreme, empty of any meaning of their own.¹²

Nevertheless, this creation was in danger of becoming an artificial construct, empty of meaning and emerging from an excessive intellectualisation. Oiticica addresses these and other issues in an article called 'A Busca do Supra-sensorial' ('The Search for the Supra-Sensorial'), in which he complains firstly about the impossibility of a 'return to myth' - or rather to return to the foundation of a national culture - secondly about the reduction of the work of art to a mere object of consumption.¹³ To his mind, the 'myth of Tropicalism' is much more than a pure and simple evocation of parrots and banana trees: it consciously challenges established structures by resisting any form of conformism, whether intellectual, social or existential. As Figueiredo argues that 'Hélio attempted to use myth as an anti-aesthetics par excellence, and this explains why his works did not generate formalism', emphasising Oiticica's challenge to the 'mythical' values of Brazilian society.¹⁴ Oiticica's engagement with the notion of myth in reference to Brazilian culture and society is more complex. *Tropicália* is the representation of both a mythical land and a decadent sub-urban environment: it is an imaginary city, whose symbols are recognisable by a community. It is 'a metaphor for the reality of the urban spaces of Rio de Janeiro [...] *Tropicália* is Rio de Janeiro, re-articulated by Oiticica'.¹⁵

Tropicália's legacy manifested itself in several other contemporaneous art practices: in the cinema novo of Glauber Rocha (1939–1981), in the theatre of the Grupo Oficina and especially in the new popular music created by the

term *mestizo*, and when addressing the specific formations of Brazilian national identity he proposed the term *Luso-Tropical*', Ibid., 364.

¹² Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicalia*, 4 March 1968, reproduced in Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Vivências* (Wien: Generali Foundation; Köln: König, 2000) 264.

¹³ Hélio Oiticica, *A busca do suprasensorial*, AHO/PHO 0182/67 8-9, 10/10/1967.

¹⁴ Figueiredo, *Oiticica in London*, 24.

¹⁵ Paulo Venancio Filho, in *Oiticica in London*, 32.

group of artists who gathered around Caetano Veloso (1942) and Gilberto Gil (1942). The broader cultural movement created in 1968 was not named 'Tropicalism' by chance. Despite the differences between the practices subsumed by this 'umbrella' term, Tropicalist creations share an experimental character and form part of the utopian social criticism quintessential to the avant-garde. This wider recognition makes *Tropicalia* an important work of art at a local level.

The idea of the 'Supra-sensorial' is further materialised in *Éden* which was staged for the first and only time during Oiticica's lifetime at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1969 [fig. 4.3]. *Éden* is 'a multisensorial environment conceived as space in which individuals would come together, hangout, and potentially form communities, however ephemeral'.¹⁶ As Oiticica describes it, this installation constitutes 'two big *Bólides* that one can go into [...] sand in one and straw in the other. The outside of the wooden border of the first one is painted in orange and of the other in yellow, both very bright, creating a kind of visual limit to the bare "acting field", and the spectator comes inside this field and acts as he wants'.¹⁷ If *Tropicália* is a structure to walk through, *Éden* is a space to live in and experience in an entirely free and non-prescribed way. The two installations enact a different relationship between space and time, potentially expanding the notion of the latter *ad infinitum*. The difference between the installations reflects Oiticica's shift from a wish to portray the stereotypical imagery of Brazil as 'devoured' by European culture to a non-representative intent, based on a conception of artistic participation as 'feeling' and 'free making' in an open and cosmic work.

Although *Éden* maintained a relation with the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé through the titles of individual components such as the *Fiaciata* cabin and the *Lemanjá* water *Penetrable*, it is distinct from *Tropicália* in that it could be experienced as a non-culturally specific space.¹⁸ *Éden* is also tied to Oiticica's notion of *Creílesure* which refers to 'an opened idea based in a behaviour state' that 'relates to the idea of the non-representative leisure'.

¹⁶ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 239.

¹⁷ Hélio Oiticica, *Éden*, in *Hélio Oiticica*, 12.

¹⁸ Michael Asbury, in *Oiticica in London*, 37.

Creillesure, asserts Oiticica, will transform the ones ‘who want to penetrate it’. However, this transmutation is anarchic – in the sense that it happens regardless of identifiable conditions – subjective, unpredictable and based on a choice of total freedom.¹⁹ As Oiticica asserts, *Éden* witnesses the shift from what was formerly ‘open’ to what is now ‘super-open’ and from ‘structural preoccupations’ to a ‘disinterest in structures’, which also reflects the artist’s anarchic tendency.²⁰ The formation of a ‘germinative community’ that emerges from a free ‘feeling-participation’ is Oiticica’s aesthetic response to a condition of political repression. Yet the staging of *Éden* took place in London, not Brazil. This suggests that Oiticica wished to avoid any explicit reference to the national context, thus conferring on this work universal relevance. Paradoxically this installation was produced soon after the 1968 sanction of the A-I5 in Brazil, which marked the beginning of the most repressive years of the dictatorship.²¹ Oiticica left Brazil for London just ten days before the promulgation of the Act.

As Calirman argues, debates between exponents of an élitist vanguard art and promoters of a popular revolutionary art were key characteristics of the Brazilian cultural scene in the sixties. The main issue was whether art should reflect the controversial national socio-political background or whether it should attempt to have a universal character, in a way similar to European modernist trends.²² Oiticica’s position on this issue was rather ambiguous: by adopting an anarchic rhetoric and assuming an ethical stance, the artist sought to find a compromise between apparently opposite perspectives by merging a domestic reality with international values and thus situating his practice within a worldwide context. Borrowing from Dunn, Oiticica can be described as aiming for a ‘differentiated universality’ that ‘subverts Eurocentric hierarchies’.²³ Dunn problematizes this notion of ‘universality’, understood as

¹⁹ Hélio Oiticica, *Éden*, in *Hélio Oiticica*, 12-13.

²⁰ Carlos Basualdo, *Hélio Oiticica: quasi-cinemas* (Kölischer Kunstverein: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 51.

²¹ *Ato Institucional Número 5*, the most infamous of the seventeen decrees retified buring the military dictatorship: among the other things it allowed the president Artur da Costa e Silva to susped political right of Brazilian citizens for a period of ten years.

²² See Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art*.

²³ Santiago, *Fazendo Preguntas*, 12 quoted in Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 101.

both ‘a colonising process leading towards a total westernisation or as a differential process in which dependent cultures disrupt the colonial relationship by asserting their alterity in relation to metropolitan culture’.²⁴ Furthermore, Oiticica’s positioning can be acknowledged as part of a general dissatisfaction shared by artists at the end of the 1960s towards earlier cultural projects that sought to emancipate Brazil from the status of intellectual and political subjection. In this light, as Dunn asserts in reference to the Brazilian Tropicalist movement, *Tropicália* can be seen as both ‘a mournful critique of these defeats as well as an exuberant celebration of Brazilian culture and its continuous permutations’.²⁵

The shift that occurs between *Tropicália* and *Éden* is reflective of a ‘disinterest in structures’ and a ‘differentiated universality’ witnessed by the merging of local and international values. The passage between these installations and the New York works – manifested in the construction of a cell of the *barracão* during Oiticica’s artistic residency at the University of Sussex – is marked by a ‘turn from redemptive utopianism to radical disillusionment’.²⁶ This attitude runs parallel to that shared by other exponents of Brazilian counterculture. While many scholars have argued that the AI-5 intellectual generation was characterised by a ‘depoliticised escapism’, others have insisted on their ‘politics of resistance’. Oiticica’s position sits between these polarities.²⁷

Moreover Oiticica’s *modus operandi* is sometimes unregulated in that the artist continuously alters the mode in which he understands his own work, firstly in relation to an ‘underdeveloped’ country and later in relation to the human condition which is acknowledged as a state of universal oppression.²⁸ Yet this stance is unconsciously related to the troubled state of affairs in Brazil

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 3. The structure constructed at the university of Essex, that anticipates the *Ninhos* Oiticica exhibited at MoMA in New York in 1970, is described as ‘an experimental cell of an experimental community, where people would live’ by Oiticica in a letter to Antonio Manuel, 21 August 1969, quoted by Michael Asbury, *Oiticica in London*, 37-38.

²⁶ Ibid., 75.

²⁷ See Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 174, where the scholar discusses the positions of Luciano Martins and Silviano Santiago.

²⁸ See Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento*, 1969, see chapter 3 for a discussion on Gullar’s text.

to the extent that Calirman names it a ‘politics of ambivalence’.²⁹ To my mind, both Oiticica’s and Manzoni’s attitudes can be also illustrated in reference to the Hegelian notion of *unendliche Herumbildung* or ‘infinite plasticity’ that leads to the perpetual transmutation of the artist, a figure that cyclically becomes a *tabula rasa*, an open receptacle full of new propositions.³⁰ Moreover, as Mari Carmen Ramírez notes, Oiticica’s practice can be explained as a ‘dialectic of challenge’ according to which each series of works is ‘sublated’ by the following one, thus pursuing a circular movement of recurring elements.³¹

The concept of ‘marginality’ displays a similar ambivalence between the aesthetic and the social realms. According to Dunn, ‘for Oiticica, marginality is an ethical stance in relation to state violence against *favelados*, as well as a strategic position-taking in the artistic field’.³² The scholar suggests that Oiticica’s marginal position needs to be analysed from both an aesthetic and social perspective. Indeed, although Oiticica was unable to recognize himself as part of the bourgeoisie, he also never entirely belonged to the favela culture.³³ The artist refers to a Marcusean concept of ‘marginality’, as attested in the following excerpt from a letter to Lygia Clark: ‘For Marcuse, artists, philosophers ... “act marginally” since they do not have a specific social class. ... When I say “marginal position” I mean something similar to the Marcusean concept.’³⁴ However, if Marcuse conceives ‘marginal acts’ only alongside a broader revolutionary process that allows the coalescence between art and praxis, Oiticica insists on the necessity of *anti-art* as a permanent condition.³⁵

²⁹ Calirman, *Brazilian Art*, 84.

³⁰ This has been a recurrent claim throughout this thesis.

³¹ Cf. Mari Carmen Ramírez, ‘Hélio’s Double-Edge Challenge,’ in Mari Carmen Ramírez ed., *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*, (London: Tate publishing; Houston: the Museum of Fine Arts, 2007). Several are the works that Oiticica produced during the eight years he lived in New York: Just to name a few, the *Nests* (literally, nest-like structures where people can lie down) and the *Cosmococa: program in progress*.

³² Dunn, “Experimental o Experimental,” 236.

³³ Harry Laus, “Oiticica: Marginal da arte,” *Jornal do Brasil*, July 20, 1966, quoted in Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolés,” *Art Journal*, 63 (summer 2004): 65.

³⁴ Hélio Oiticica, “Letter to Lygia Clark,” November 8, 1968, unpublished, translation by Susana Calo, quoted in Luke Skrebowski, “Revolution in the Aesthetic Revolution: Hélio Oiticica and the concept of Creileasure,” *Third Text* 26 (2012): 65-78.

³⁵ See *Ibid.*

Oiticica therefore sees a marginality status as ‘natural’ to the artist and the ‘no man’s land’ of the favela – the marginal place par excellence – as ‘a base from which to launch attacks on preconception, stereotypes, [and] bourgeois conditioning’.³⁶

The questions that follow this consideration deal with both the relation between art and marginality in Oiticica’s practice and the ethos at stake in Oiticica’s consciously self-marginalised position. Marginality is a leitmotif within Brazilian counterculture which can be addressed from three heterogeneous perspectives: firstly, as the experimental position manifested in the editorial project *Navilouca* (1974); secondly, as a redemption of criminality, apparent in Oiticica’s text ‘O heroi anti-heroi e o anti heroi anonimo’ (1965-1966); and thirdly as an ambivalent expression of guerrilla art and Arte Povera – a ‘third world aesthetics’ which emerged in the exhibition ‘Do corpo à terra’ (1970). The aim of the sections is twofold: on the one hand, I want to problematise the correspondence between social upheaval and aesthetic innovation both in Oiticica’s work and more generally in the practice of Brazilian artists in the seventies; on the other hand, I want to display the ambiguities and contradictions at stake in Oiticica’s treatment of the notion of marginality.

2. ‘Project Navilouca’: madness and experimentation

The one-off editorial project *Navilouca* (1974) [fig. 4.4] was an idea of Torquato Neto and Waly Salomão. They brought into collaboration together concrete poets (Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari), Neo-Concrete artists (Oiticica himself and Lygia Clark), former Tropicalists (Caetano Veloso and Rogerio Duarte) and artists associated with the *cultura marginal* (Jorge Salomao, Duda Machado, Chacal and Stephen Berg). The project collected and reproduced not only texts and works of art but also ideograms, photos, film stills, collages and cartoons. As Dunn suggests, the

³⁶ See Monica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944-1969* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 135.

title *Navilouca* is a reference to the *stultifera navis*, the ‘ships of late Medieval or Renaissance periods that ferried around Europe the deranged people who had been expelled and banished from their communities’.³⁷ The reference to ‘the ship of fools’ witnesses the recovery of a complex historical and theoretical legacy. Indeed this trope originated during classical antiquity and was first mentioned by Plato. The allegory refers to a vessel whose captain has been usurped by a mob of deranged human beings lacking any direction. This theme became particularly popular during the Renaissance thanks both to Sebastian Brant’s satire, *Das Narrenschiff* (*Stultifera Navis*, 1494) and to the painting of the same name by Hieronymus Bosch from the same decade (1490-1500).

The title *Stultifera Navis* plays on the ambivalence of its meaning. In Latin ‘navis’ not only means ‘ship’ but also refers to the nave of a church. Therefore, Brant’s satire could also be interpreted as a critical parody of the Catholic Church, traditionally labelled as the ‘ark of salvation’. Lastly, this allegory is acknowledged in *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961) by Michel Foucault. In this text’s first chapter, named *Stultifera navis*, Foucault talks about leprosy and exclusion and points out how the disappearance of leprosy did not necessarily mean an equivalent dissolution of ideas of marginalisation; on the contrary ‘what lasted longer than leprosy, and persisted for years after the lazar houses had been emptied, were the values and images attached to the leper, and the importance for society of this insistent, fearsome figure who was carefully excluded’.³⁸ The ghostly figure of the leper was therefore replaced by other categories of human beings, marginalised ‘outsiders’ like the poor, the homeless, the prisoner and the ‘alienated’ who suffer from the same forms of social exclusion. The Ship of Fools was part of this motif and was perhaps used as a ‘means of expulsion’ of the homeless to prevent them from wandering around cities. Yet it was a form of exclusion that affected only certain mad people as others were kept in

³⁷ Dunn, “Experimental or Experimental”, 247.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

hospitals. The figure of the madman was ambiguous and as such it acquired several different significations.

According to Foucault, madness and reason are bonded in a relationship of cause and effect, to the point that the ‘fool’ at the centre of the stage became the ‘harbinger of truth’.³⁹ Therefore, as argued by Foucault, in between ‘marginalisation’ and ‘truth telling’, the Ship of Fools device holds ambivalent purposes and values:

On the one side is the ship of fools, where mad faces slowly slip away into the night of the world, in landscapes that speak of strange alchemies of knowledge, of the dark menace of bestiality, and the end of time. On the other side is the ship of fools that is merely there for the instruction of the wise, an exemplary didactic odyssey whose purpose is to highlight faults in the human character.⁴⁰

Maintaining the ambiguity that Foucault bestows to the figure of the ‘fool’, *Navilouca* subtly denounced the state of violence and political repression that affected Oiticica’s contemporary social and cultural panorama. At the same time, this editorial project reaffirmed the need to adopt an experimental position and to draw on different disciplines by dissolving the boundaries between different forms of artistic manifestation. Drawing on an anarchic position that mixes together different practices and practitioners associated with a culture of resistance to the regime, *Navilouca* enacts its critique from the point of view of the ‘margins’.

Navilouca reproduced several of Oiticica’s earlier works, including those realised in New York such as *Babylonests*, *Ninhos*, *Omar veste a Capa 24 P31 – Parangolé*, a film still from *Agrippina é Roma-Manhattan* [fig. 4.5] and a 1972 text entitled ‘Experimentar o Experimental’. In this text Oiticica narrates his artistic trajectory from 1959 onwards, explaining that now what is at stake in his practice is the ‘experimental’. While defining painting as ‘a pet of the established bourgeoisie’, Oiticica remarks that the ‘experimental is not

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26.

experimental art'.⁴¹ By affirming that 'the scattered roots of the experimental are sprung energies for an open number of possibilities', Oiticica shifts away from his earlier anthropophagic attitude of digesting the past and foreign tendencies in order to create something with an indigenous Brazilian voice – the motto par excellence of the Brazilian avant-garde. In place of this, he establishes a rootless anarchic approach that aims to change the 'values of things'.⁴² Quoting Yoko Ono, Oiticica remarks:

I hate the artists who think their art is creative. I call that kind of art "fart". These artists who make a big lump of sculpture and call it art are just narcissists. ... Creating is not the joy of the artist. The joy of the artist is to change the value of things.⁴³

Dunn targets Oiticica's discussion of 'possibilities' for using a 'speculative and utopian language'. Such a statement would necessarily drawn Oiticica back into an avant-garde position. I seek to argue that Oiticica's open proposition of going beyond a mere 'imitative invention' speaks to an apparently overly ambitious but anarchic project of changing the 'value of things'. In this manner, Oiticica is willing to detach himself from an utopian avant-garde stance, promoting from a marginal stance the 'experimental exercise of freedom' and overcoming the idea of an art object subjected to institutional or market regulations.⁴⁴

2.1 Oiticica's 'O herói anti-herói e o anti-herói anônimo': the redemption of the outlaw

⁴¹ See Hélio Oiticica, *To Experiment the Experimental*, AHO/PHO 0511/72 - 6/15, 22/03/1972-01/01/1973.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 'The experimental exercise of freedom' is a phrase by the critic Mario Pedrosa. 'With this phrase, Pedrosa sought to describe the work of those Brazilian, as well as non-Brazilian, artists who radically reconceived the idea of art. As Pedrosa stated, these artists developed practices that 'reformulated and liberated the aesthetic act so that it could give itself up to completely unfamiliar transactions: to...the experimental exercise of freedom.' In other words, they did not conceive of the work of art as an object, but as an open proposition. This shift enabled them to liberate themselves from the constraints of the market, of institution, of tradition'. Rina Carvajal quoted in John Alan Farmer, "The experimental exercise of freedom: a conversation with Rina Carvajal and Alma Ruiza," *Art Journal*, 59 (Spring 2001) 23.

The text submitted for the project *Navilouca* – ‘To experiment the Experimental’ – bears little or no reference to the legacy of the ‘Ship of Fools’ implied by the title of the magazine itself. Conversely, a text written few years before, ‘O herói anti-herói e o anti-herói anonimo’, presented on the occasion of the exhibition in 1968 *O artista Brasileiro e iconografia de massa* curated by Federico Moraes at the MAM/RJ, seems to be directly inspired by Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation*. In this text on the figure of the ‘outlaw’ Oiticica explains the *raison d’être* of two of his works: *Bolide-caixa n. 18- B33* (1965-1966) [fig. 4.6] and *Bolide-caixa n. 21 B44* (1967) [fig. 4.7]. The former is dedicated to Cara de Cavalo, a bandit shot by the Brazilian police in 1964. It constitutes a box bearing a picture of the dead body of the criminal as it was published in newspapers, combined with the phrase ‘Aqui está e ficará! Contemplai seu silêncio heróico’ (‘Here he is and he will be! Behold his heroic silence’). As a symbol of marginality and social oppression, according to Oiticica, Cara de Cavalo was scapegoated by the police to be presented as ‘public enemy number one’ and ostracised as a ‘leper’, implying that he suffered from an incurable disease with no possibility of ‘redemption’.⁴⁵ In this passage it is worth noting the reference to leprosy as the emblem par excellence of social exclusion, comparably theorised by Foucault. Oiticica affirms that with his homage to Cara de Cavalo he intended to denounce the state of affairs in Brazil, a society based on prejudice and ‘undermined by the consumptive capitalistic machine that creates its anti-heroes as animals to be sacrificed’.⁴⁶ Cara de Cavalo becomes a martyr, not only for those who are marginalized, but for a society of indifference and intolerance in general.

Beside the figure of the martyr embodied by Cara de Cavalo is the character of the anti-hero who dies anonymously along with his silent problems and frustrations; ‘his sacrifice falls into oblivion like a newly born fetus’.⁴⁷ The reference here is to the criminal Alcir Figueira da Silva, who committed

⁴⁵ ‘Essa sociedade castrou toda possibilidade da sua sobrevivência, como se fora ela uma lepra, um mal incurável’, Hélio Oiticica, *O herói anti-herói e o anti-herói anonimo*, Rio de Janeiro, 1968, AHO/PHO 0131/68.

⁴⁶ ‘Minada em todos os sentidos pela máquina capitalista consumitiva, cria os seus ídolos anti-heróis como o animal a ser sacrificado’, Hélio Oiticica, *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ ‘O seu sacrifício, tudo cai no esquecimento como um feto parido’, Hélio Oiticica, ‘O herói anti-herói e o anti-herói anonimo,’ Rio de Janeiro, 1968, AHO/PHO 0131/68.

suicide to avoid imprisonment. To pay homage to this miserable ‘anti-hero’, Oiticica realised both the celebrated red flag ‘Seja Marginal, Seja Herói’, which became a symbol of resistance within Brazilian counter culture, and the *Bolide-caixa n.21 B44*. The latter constitutes a box bearing a photograph of the dead body of Alcir Figueira da Silva on its bottom combined with a sentence on a superimposed screen that reads ‘por que a impossibilidade?’ (‘Why the impossibility?’). This box is covered by another box full of sand that is suggestive of a ‘mausoleum’ for the deceased. Through these works Oiticica wanted to express the tragedy of dying in anonymity and the impossibility of communication, questioning what kind of ‘diabolical neurosis – so Shakespearean, by the way’ made a man to prefer death rather than prison?⁴⁸ In this *bólido*, there is another reference to Foucault, although it is a rather puzzling one. Oiticica compares the act of revolting against a socio-political condition by choosing death to a condition of insanity. In this manner, he seems to invalidate and condemn the act of suicide itself.

However, there are two possible literary sources which indicate that this is not the case and that instead Oiticica subtly endorses and celebrates Alcir Figueira’s suicide. The first is the reference to Shakespeare. In Shakespearean theatre the redeemed figure of the fool tends to represent the messenger of truth who unmasks the falsehood and hypocrisy that underlie a society based on appearances. Following Shakespeare, Foucault stresses the link between ‘madness’ and ‘reason’. Affected by ‘evil insanity’, Alcir Figueira committed suicide. Yet the ostensible madness he suffered from was not in opposition to ‘reason’ but was rather an integral component of it, ‘forming either part of its secret strength, one of the moments of its manifestation or a paradoxical form where reason becomes conscious of itself’.⁴⁹

A second parallel can be drawn with the Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. In the first canto of *Purgatory*, Virgil introduces Dante to Catone, the gatekeeper of the Purgatory by addressing him with the following words:

⁴⁸ ‘Que diabólica neurose - aliás tão shakesperiana’, Hêlio Oiticica, *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Foucault, *History of Madness*, 32.

May it please thee to be gracious to his coming.
 He goes seeking liberty, which is so dear,
 as he knows who gives his life for it.⁵⁰

Dante is presented to the reader and to the guardian of *Purgatory* as someone looking for freedom, while the remaining part of the tercet, ‘as he knows who gives his life for it’, points directly to Catone. Marco Porcio Catone Uticense (Rome, 95 BC. – Utica, 46 BC), a Roman politician, writer, general and monetary magistrate, was a follower of stoicism who committed suicide to escape Caesar’s dictatorship. Catone’s gesture is recorded as an extreme act of rebellion to the regime and of affirmation of the values of a free democratic system. Dante’s ethical position in respect to the suicide has been discussed at length by scholarly criticism. While condemned by the poet earlier on in *Canto XIII* with regard to Pier delle Vigne, in relation to the figure of Catone suicide is praised as the most ‘heroic’ act. Indeed, in his time Catone became the most recognisable symbol of social and political freedom. Oiticica, by perpetuating the memory of both Cara de Cavalo and Alcir da Figueira, draws on a similar symbolism, romanticising the figure of the outlaw, not as evidence of virtue but as an example of adversity towards the state.

Oiticica asserts that:

This homage is an anarchist attitude against every kind of armed force: police, army, etc. I make poems of protests (through capes and boxes) that have a greater social meaning, but this dedication to Cara de Cavalo reflects an important ethical moment, which for me is decisive, because it reflects individual rebellion against any kind of social conditioning. In other words: violence is justified as a means of rebellion but never as a means of oppression.⁵¹

The parallel with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* reveals other similarities, further illuminating Oiticica’s stance. When Virgil addresses Catone, he

⁵⁰ ‘Or ti piaccia gradir la sua venuta/libertà va cercando, ch’è sì cara,/come sa chi per lei vita rifiuta,’ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio, Canto I, vv. 70-72, trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961), 23.

⁵¹ *Hélio Oiticica* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1969) 6, quoted in Carlos Basualdo, *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas*, 48.

simultaneously and deliberately creates an empathetic link between Catone and Dante. Dante is the one looking for freedom and Catone, who chose freedom by sacrificing his own life, is prompted to identify himself with the condition of the poet. Similarly, Oiticica identified himself with ‘social outcasts’, as witnessed not only by the homage he pays to the tragic fate of famous criminals or by his works in collaboration with the *favelados*, but also by his own words.

This is expressed in a letter to Lygia Clark:

Today I refuse to have any conditioning prejudice of any sort: I do what I want and my tolerance reaches every limit, unless a direct physical threat: to keep oneself integral is not easy, especially in a marginal position: today I am marginal at the margins, not marginal aspiring to the petty bourgeois or conformism, but only marginal: at the edge of everything, which gives me an unexpected freedom of action, and for this I only need to be myself, according to my principle of pleasure.⁵²

According to Oiticica, a total freedom of action can be reached only by deliberately assuming a ‘marginal position’ in opposition to the bourgeois and conformist society to which he actually belonged. ‘Freedom’ interrelates with ‘suicide’, ‘criminality’ and ‘(self-)marginality’ against a blurred ethical background. Crime is neither fully praised nor condemned by Oiticica. The artist affirms that ‘crime is actually a desperate search for true happiness in contrast to false, established, stagnant social values which preach “well being” and “family life” but only work for a small minority’.⁵³ The ‘happiness’ Oiticica mentions in the text above is materialised by the notion of *Creïlesure* that Oiticica sees as marginalised in current society because human beings are alienated within an oppressive world.⁵⁴ As witnessed in the letter to Lygia Clark, Oiticica willingly assumes a marginal position as the condition of

⁵² ‘Hoje, recuso-me a qualquer prejuízo de ordem condicionante: faço o que quero e minha tolerância vai a todos os limites, a não ser o da ameaça física direta: manter se integral é difícil, ainda mais sendo se marginal: hoje sou marginal ao marginal, não marginal aspirando à pequena burguesia ou ao conformismo, o que acontece com a maioria, mas marginal mesmo: à margem de tudo, o que me dá surpreendente liberdade de ação - e para isso preciso ser apenas eu mesmo segundo meu princípio de prazer...’ Helio Oiticica, Letter to Lygia Clark, 8th November 1968, in Figueiredo, Luciano. *Lygia Clark-Hélio Oiticica, Cartas 1964-1974* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1998) 44, my translation.

⁵³ Hélio Oiticica quoted in Juan A. Suárez, “Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism,” *Criticism* 56 (Spring 2014): 319.

⁵⁴ See Luke Skrebowski, “Revolution in the Aesthetic Revolution,” 65-78.

production of experimental art and the refusal of both traditional aesthetic categories and bourgeois values proper to a conformist society. Yet, as I will argue, this position actually slides into a fascination for ‘commodity culture’ that was bursting onto the New York scene in the sixties.

While Oiticica’s (self-)marginalised attitude has not been the focus of scholarly attention, the link between art and marginality is discussed in recent critical literature. As an example, with regard to the intersection between Tropicalism and marginality, Juan A. Suarez suggests that “‘Tropical’ designates an open terrain, a projection surface – like the TV screen in *Tropicália* – where different marginalities might converge: artistic, social, sexual, ethic, epistemic, and even material’ and describes the installation *Tropicalia* as ‘a structure of engagement and connection, and a very real and ultimately political commitment to plurality and indifference’.⁵⁵ Therefore, Suarez’s observation further complicates Oiticica’s position in relation to the notion of marginality as he addresses *Tropicália* as both a place of social inclusion and a modern and tropical ‘Ship of Fools’.

The installation *Tropicália* is not the only of Oiticica’s works that has been interpreted in reference to ‘marginality’. Scholar Carlos Basualdo argues that ‘the romantic recuperation of the figure of the outlaw [...] is for the artist nothing other than an attempt to resist the instrumentalising tendencies of late capitalism in the sphere of cultural production’.⁵⁶ This statement refers to Oiticica’s *Cosmococas*.

Cosmococas – program in progress were created by Oiticica in collaboration with both Neville d’Almeida and Thomas Valentin. They comprise nine installations made with non-narrative projected slides and a background soundtrack that dominates the closed environment. Spectators were invited to lie down and experience the images and sound. The images projected on the walls associated pop culture idols, like Marilyn Monroe and Jimi Hendrix, with cocaine, the symbol of illegality par excellence. Basualdo argues that the use of cocaine aims to take the audience ‘outside of the law’

⁵⁵ Juan A. Suárez, “Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism”, 322-323.

⁵⁶ Carlos Basualdo, *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas*, 48.

and therefore outside of the power relations established by the late capitalist system of production. At the same time, by bolstering the relations between environment, image and the body of the audience, as well through the use of fragmented and non-narrative cinema, the artist attempts to ‘overcome the spectacle’, understood as a situation of passive spectatorial consumption. In short, according to Basualdo, the use of cocaine signifies both being outside of the law and consequently being outside of the logic of the spectacle.⁵⁷

Conversely, scholar Ivana Bentes suggests that ‘the decisive question’ implied by the *Cosmococas* ‘is less a moral condemnation of spectacle, which fascinated Oiticica, than the desire to open cinema and its language to other realms’.⁵⁸ This is witnessed by Oiticica’s admiration for ‘Godards’s meta-linguistic questioning of the very quintessence of filmmaking’ that he parallels to the innovations of Piet Mondrian in painting.⁵⁹ No doubt the use of cocaine is a strong reference to illegality; however Oiticica’s relation to it is also entangled in several other threads: firstly, in the urge to experiment with new unorthodox materials that substantiate his novel experimental stance; secondly, in the pursuit of a dimension of ‘*creileisure*’ to be experienced by the spectator-participant; and lastly, in the appropriation of idols of pop culture, a tactic that also nods to American Pop Art, since ten years earlier Andy Warhol had produced his famous series of Marilyn’s portraits.⁶⁰

Therefore, Oiticica’s reference to illegality and marginality engenders a novel dimension of his work that moves from the romanticisation of the criminal who fights against the Brazilian oppressive social apparatus to the glorification of iconic celebrities like Jimi Hendrix. For Oiticica, the latter’s performance was ‘not only ecstatic but a historical limit or breach ... as important as the Malevich white-on-white, or Mallarmé with his *coup de*

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ivana Bentes, *H.O. and Cinema-World*, in Carlos Basualdo, *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas*, 142-143.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ In the previous section I have discussed how, according to major critics, Tropicália is both appropriation and critique of American Pop Art. I would argue that in the *Cosmococas*, Oiticica has a less critical attitude, being himself devoured by those symbols he had previously condemned. The mention to Warhol doesn’t suggest any comparison or parallelism: simply I want to point out that Oiticica, leaving in New York, could have been unconsciously influenced by American Pop Art – since he uses Marilyn Monroe among other iconic celebrities, already portrayed by Andy Warhol.

dés'.⁶¹ It is my opinion that the shift in Oiticica's interests actually strengthens the bonds between the aesthetic and social dimension and between the radical artist and the socially-engaged activist. If Cara de Cavalo's and Alcir Figueira's actions had made extreme and 'heroic' gestures against an intolerant bourgeois set of social values then, according to Oiticica, Jimi Hendrix fought against obsolete traditional aesthetic categories by radically reinventing rock music and pioneering a novel understanding of 'performance'.

2.2 The exhibition 'Do corpo à terra': in between Guerrilla art and Arte Povera

As Calirman points out, despite the absence of an official aesthetic or visual code prescribed by the military regime, the style that emerged from the exhibition *Do corpo à terra* was renamed as 'the aesthetics of the margins'.⁶² Its curator, Frederico Moraes, interprets the works exhibited – or better 'performed' – in the show as examples of Guerrilla Art. *Do corpo à terra* took place between 17 and 21 April 1970 in the streets and in the park of the city of Belo Horizonte in the state of Minas Geiras. The label 'Guerrilla Art' characterised specifically, but not only, the 'actions' of Cildo Meireles and Artur Barrio. Meireles realised *Tirandentes: Totem-monumento ao Preso Político*, which involved burning live chickens in front of a horrified audience. The action had a great impact in the press also because it was staged during the Tirandentes day, a festivity that commemorates the execution of the Brazilian national hero Joaquim José da Silva Xavier (6 August 1746 - 21 April 1792) who, in the eighteenth century, had fought for national independence against Portuguese colonial oppression. The reference to the state of subjection and politics of violence pursued by the Brazilian military regime was clear; at the same time, because of the employment of living animals, this work was criticised as ethically unacceptable. Moreover, it questioned the necessity of

⁶¹ Hélio Oiticica, *Instauration*, Ibid., 147.

⁶² Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art*, 94.

the material presence of the art object in the performance, drastically blurring the boundaries between guerrilla action and art practice.

Artur Barrio's work also provoked scandal. The artist scattered into an open sewer fifteen 'trouxas esangüentadas' (Bloody Bundles) made of rags, bones, meat, red paint and string [fig. 4.8]. The striking resemblance to actual human bodies alarmed the population to such an extent that the fire department and the military police intervened. This work alluded to the bodies of political prisoners tortured and killed by the military government. Because even artistic institutions were no longer able to provide security any more, artists felt the urge to inflame an 'artistic guerrilla', corroding the art object to the extreme and thereby conferring on it an ephemeral existence in order to escape any ideological or institutional subjection. In the manifesto published to coincide with the exhibition, Frederico Morais further strengthened the parallelism between the figure of the artist and that of the *guerrillheiro*:

The artist today is a kind of guerrilla fighter. The art a sort of ambush. Acting unexpectedly, when and where it is least expected, in an unusual way (...) the artist creates a permanent state of tension, a constant expectation. Everything can be transformed into art, even the most banal everyday event.⁶³

Oiticica took part in the exhibition in a different manner, staging a 'situation' that bears little connection to the notion of 'guerrilla art'. The American artist Lee Jaffe executed Oiticica's proposal, as at that time Oiticica was already in New York. The work was called *Trilha de açúcar*: Lee Jaffe created a long line of white sugar poured into a trench dug in the Serra do Curral famous for its rich red soil. The use of sugar alludes to Portuguese colonisation as this was a product imported by the Portuguese themselves and cultivated by African slaves. The work therefore could be seen as a nod to Brazilian 'transnational'

⁶³ 'O Artista, hoje, é uma espécie de guerrilheiro. A arte uma espécie de emboscada. Atuando imprevistamente, onde e quando é menos esperado, de maneira inusitada (...) o artista cria um estado permanente de tensão, uma expectativa constante. Tudo pode transformar-se em arte, mesmo o mais banal evento cotidiano', Frederico Morais, "Contra a Arte Afluente: O Corpo é o Motor da 'Obra'," quoted in Fabiana de Castro Oliveira, "DO CORPO À TERRA: uma análise do evento," accessed February 1, 2016, available at http://www.emnomedosartistas.org.br/FBSP/pt/ProjetosEspeciais/Documents/fabiana_castro.pdf.

colonial history. At the same time the area was famous for its mines: the performance was interrupted not by the police, but by the tractors from a mine.⁶⁴

Focusing on the interaction between ephemerality, art and the environment, and excluding the direct participation of the public, Oiticica's proposition provoked considerable criticism. Francisco Bittercurt, author of the article *Geração Tranca-Ruas* published in the *Jornal do Brasil* in May of the same year wrote: 'Hélio Oiticica is internationally renowned [...] We think, however, that his trail of sugar was an insult to the poor people of Belo Horizonte.'⁶⁵ This criticism needs to be explained in the light of the aforementioned 'aesthetics of the margins' that the exhibition sought to display.⁶⁶ This label – 'aesthetics of the margins' – establishes a correspondence between a socio-economic situation and the quality of the material that constitutes the art object, as witnessed by Artur Barrio's definition of a 'third world aesthetics' as one which employs 'perishable, cheap materials' to 'construct work in confrontation with economic hierarchies'.⁶⁷

This 'third world aesthetics', pursued by Brazilian artists during the 1970s, was very different from the contemporary development of *Arte Povera* in Northern Italy, at least in the way in which the critic Germano Celant shaped the ethos of this group. While Celant initially conferred on it the ideological

⁶⁴ The debate about whether Oiticica participated or not to the exhibition or not is still live. Oiticica's archive in Rio de Janeiro maintains that the work *trilha de açúcar* was executed by Lee Jaffe only. However, there are two articles from the press that mention Oiticica as one of the participants: Norma Pereira Rêgo, "Do corpo a terra em Minas," *Ultima Hora*, April 23, 1970, and Francisco Bittencourt, "As geração trancaruas," *Jornal do Brasil*, May 9, 1970. Art critic Frederico Moraes, responded to the latter, claiming that Oiticica had not taken part neither in the execution nor in the planning of the work, whose idea was entirely of Lee Jaffe. Despite my efforts, I haven't yet had the chance to interview Lee Jaffe, good friend of Oiticica in New York, who is probably the only one who can have the last word on this debate. Therefore, in this thesis I have decided to claim that Oiticica did play some part in the making of *Trilha de Açúcar*.

⁶⁵ 'Hélio Oiticica é conhecido internacionalmente [...] Achamos, no entanto, que sua trilha de açúcar foi uma ofensa aos pobres de Belo Horizonte.' Francisco Bittercurt, "Geração Tranca-Ruas," *Jornal do Brasil*, May 8, 1970, quoted in Fabiana de Castro Oliveira, *DO CORPO À TERRA*, 22

⁶⁶ This denomination appears not only in Claudia Calirman's book mentioned before but also in Carolina Dellamore's article, "Do corpo à terra, 1970: Art Guerrilha e resistência à ditadura militar," *Revista Cantareina*, 20 (2014): 114, where both the exhibition at the Salão da Bússola and *Do corpo à terra* are defined as 'transgressive', 'experimental', and 'marginal'.

⁶⁷ Artur Barrio, "Manifesto (1970)," quoted in Anne Katherine Brodbeck, "The Salão da Bússola (1969) and *Do Corpo à Terra* (1970): Parallel Developments in Brazilian and International Art," *RACAR: revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, Vol. 38 (2013): 110.

connotation of guerrilla art, he subsequently advocated for its apolitical standpoint.⁶⁸ At the beginning Brazilian artists were attracted by the idea of a 'poor art', but they were ultimately disappointed to find that the use of 'poor means' was not meant to be the reflection of an 'economic reality'.⁶⁹

Oiticica, together with Barrio, clearly distanced himself from *Arte Povera*, harshly criticising its very ethos, as witnessed in a letter he sent to Lygia Clark in 1968:

'Italian *arte povera* is made with more or less advanced means, it is the sublimation of poverty, but in an anecdotal visual way, deliberately poor but very rich. Indeed, it is the assimilation of the remains of an oppressive civilization and its transformation into consumption, the capitalisation of the idea of poverty. For us it seems that the economy of element is tied directly to the idea of structure.'⁷⁰

It becomes apparent then why Oiticica's and Lee Jaffe's performance was severely criticised by the press: using an expensive product like sugar in a poor area such as Belo Horizonte seemed like an insult and was in danger of sliding towards the same hypocritical dimension as *arte povera* artists. However, as noted by scholar Anne Brodbeck, this work precedes the already mentioned *Cosmococas*, in which, as we have seen, the artist utilises cocaine – 'a highly charged commodity similarly exploited in the West – as medium.'⁷¹ As argued above, cocaine brings the work and the audience interacting with it onto an 'illegal' terrain beyond the law; at the same time it relies on the black market of luxury goods. *Trilha de Açúcar* can be explained as belonging to a similar post-colonial discourse as it is also an expensive good inaccessible for common people.

Oiticica's attitude towards the notion of marginality is difficult to pin down. It first comes to light through the romanticised figure of the outlaw and later through the figure of fallen Pop idols such as Marilyn Monroe and Jimi

⁶⁸ Re misunderstandings in the reception of the Arte Povera movement because of Celant criticism cf. Jacopo Galimberti, "A Third-worldist Art? Germano Celant's Invention of *Arte Povera*," *Art History*, 36, (2013): 418-441.

⁶⁹ See Anne Katherine Brodbeck, "The Salão da Bússola (1969) and Do Corpo à Terra (1970)," 114.

⁷⁰ Hélio Oiticica, "Letter to Lygia Clark 1968," *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Anne Katherine Brodbeck, "The Salão da Bússola (1969) and Do Corpo à Terra (1970)," 114.

Hendrix. This thus establishes a dialogue between pop cultural figures and the socially engaged activist. Oiticica's engagement with marginality also relates to a post-colonial legacy through the use of cocaine and sugar, products that belong to Latin American pre-colonial history and that have become fully integrated as luxury goods in the western market. Oiticica's heterogeneous practice puts marginality at issue. The artist makes it a synonym of an anti-institutional standpoint and, latterly, he adopts it as a strategic visual code. In this way Oiticica's position complicates still further the relationship between the aesthetic realm and the social context.

3. Piero Manzoni's social commentary: the politics of freedom

Oiticica did not take part in person in the exhibition 'Do corpo à terra'. His action was 'deferred' and performed by what we can call an 'executor'.⁷² Moreover, because of the criticism the work met, Oiticica disavowed the work itself, eventually assuming a detached marginal position from that of the dominant artistic panorama and its credo. Years earlier, Piero Manzoni assumed a similar critical position. In the following sections I unfold this position, analysing the politics at stake in Manzoni's practice.

As reported by the magazine *Lo Specchio* on 12 June 1961 [fig. 4.9] the state attorney Luigi Costanza notified the directors of the Brera Gallery in Milan of a decree demanding the requisition of three works of art displayed in the exhibition *Anti-Procès 3* on the charges of 'offences to the Supreme Pontiff' and 'defamation of religion'.⁷³ The show featured a work entitled 'Collective anti-fascist painting' signed by Enrico Baj, Roberto Crippa, Gianni Dova, Errò and Jean-Jacques Lebel. In the middle of the painting were two of Baj's grotesque depictions generals, which carried the following inscriptions: Death, Nation, Morality and Liberty. One of the two figures, who were described as 'idols' by the public prosecutor, bore in its mouth an image of the Madonna, alongside a photomontage reproducing the Pope and the cardinals.

⁷² Here I am referring to Umberto Eco's understanding of the term. See Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta* (Milano; Bompiani, 1962).

⁷³ Giorgio Mistretta, "Gli affari dell'Antiprocès," *Lo Specchio*, June 25, 1961, 30-31.

The police seized this work and subsequently kept it in storage for twenty-five long years.

Despite an earlier declaration of an anti-fascist position and his acquaintance with the left-wing clique of artists that had colonised both Albisola Marina and the Bar Jamaica, Manzoni did not participate in the making of the painting or in the exhibition, which suggests an apparent total lack of political commitment. According to Galimberti, the relationship Manzoni had with the artists, and particularly with the writers and poets who congregated at the Bar Jamaica in Brera, was very close, to the point that he invited some of them to publish in *Azimuth*.⁷⁴ The work of Edoardo Sanguineti and Nanni Balestrini, for example, shared with Manzoni's own work a similar denial of the neo-realist approach; however, unlike the work of Manzoni, theirs was deeply imbued with left-wing Marxist ideas.⁷⁵

Manzoni's (anti-)political commitment will be addressed in this part of the chapter from three different perspectives. Firstly I analyse the historical background of Manzoni's shift from an earlier left-wing standpoint to an apparent denial of any form of political engagement. Secondly I investigate how Søren Kierkegaard's notion of 'freedom' influenced Manzoni's understanding of it and how it is reflected in both the aesthetic dimension and the art system. Following on from that, I shall take into consideration the (anti-) politics at stake in three of Manzoni's works: *Linee* (the *Lines*, 1959), *Corpi d'Aria* (*Bodies of Air*, 1959-1960) and *Merda d'Artista* (*Artist's Shit*, 1961).

3.1 'Dictators must hang from their feet in the public square': juvenile political concerns

Before discussing the eventual relationship between ethical, artistic, and philosophical freedom in Manzoni's practice, I will look at Manzoni's (anti-)political commitment by examining his juvenile diary (1954-1955), which

⁷⁴ 'Azimuth' was the name of the magazine founded and edited by Manzoni together with Enrico Castellani. Only two issues were published: the first in September 1959 and the second in January 1960.

⁷⁵ See Jacopo Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne," *Oxford Art Journal*, 35 (2012) 75-94.

attests to his anti-fascist alignment. For example, on 20 April 1954, discussing the movie *All The King's Men* that he has just seen in Milan, Manzoni adds the following comment:⁷⁶

They did end very well.
Two bullets in his body and nothing else.
Dictators must hang from their feet in the public square.
The unconsciousness of the people in the face of corruption and meanness is sometimes frightening. At least it was so in this film. After all here in Italy it took twenty years for us to bump off Mussolini ...
We have been unconscious for twenty years ...⁷⁷

In another excerpt, Manzoni's words on fascism are even more brutal and vehement: 'Fascism is all around us, the black shirts are everywhere ... they pose a permanent danger, they are an evil, a continuous damage. We have to kill them all.'⁷⁸

This strong opposition to fascism was due to the first-hand experience Manzoni had had of the regime during his childhood. Born in 1933, the artist preserved a vivid memory of the years of the 'resistance'; this probably contributed to the concept of 'freedom' becoming an important value for Manzoni to pursue. Quoting from *Kampagne in Frankreich* (1792), a report in diary form of a French military campaign by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Manzoni affirms:

When Goethe saw the Austrian armies defeated by revolutionary France he said 'here comes a new era' or something similar.
I had the same feeling years ago on the day of the Liberation. For me, born and living until now under fascism was like entering a new world.

⁷⁶ USA, 1949, directed by Robert Rossen; based on a novel by Robert Penn Warren. The movie narrates the rise and the fall of a corrupted southern American Politician.

⁷⁷ 'L'han fatto finire troppo bene. Due pallottole in corpo e basta. I dittatori bisogna attaccarli via per i piedi sulla pubblica piazza. L'incoscienza della gente di fronte alla corruzione e alla bassezza alle volte è spaventosa. Almeno in questo film era tale. D'altra parte qui in Italia Mussolini c'abbiamo messo 20 anni per accopparlo ... Siamo stati incoscienti per vent'anni'. Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone, (Milano: Electa, 2013), 75.

⁷⁸ 'Il fascismo è intorno a noi, le camicie nere sono dovunque (...) essi sono un pericolo permanente, essi sono un male, un danno continuo. Bisogna ucciderli tutti'. Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, May 7, 1954, 122-123, my translation.

And for what I saw and understood then, for what the Resistance represented, for freedom, for everything I will always fight.⁷⁹

Manzoni's political orientation is not easy to pin down and earlier anti-fascist claims are often disproved by the artist's continuous after-thoughts. It has also been argued that Manzoni's reference to philosophers Guido De Ruggero and Benedetto Croce demonstrates 'subtle political philosophical leanings related to anti-fascism, liberalism and to the study of philosophy'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, this statement lacks evidence as Manzoni spent one year attending the faculty of philosophy in Rome and his thoughts make continuous references to contemporary philosophical textbooks. However, the influence that Croce's aesthetics had on Manzoni's early critical thinking occupies a preeminent position.

Specifically, Manzoni's understanding of the concept of 'art' is shaped around Croce's ideal of classicism that emphasizes its universal and absolute character. Going back to his political ideas, early in 1952 Manzoni defined himself as 'liberal', but between 1952 and 1954 he adopted an anti-bourgeois position which approached communist ideas – although he always expressed some doubts about it:

Communism and not communism.

I have taken the side of communism, for what it is valuable. And there is a lot to value.

But I believe that communism must respect the individual and the spirit of tolerance and freedom. (...)

However, politics, the world are a mess.⁸¹

Hereafter Manzoni declared himself to be totally absorbed by an 'artistic dimension', thus rejecting any restrained political alignment. A few years later,

⁷⁹ 'Quando Goethe vide gli eserciti austriaci sconfitti dalla Francia rivoluzionaria disse 'Qui nasce una nuova epoca, o qualcosa del genere. La stessa sensazione provai io anni fa il giorno della Liberazione. Per me nato e vissuto finora sotto il fascismo fu come entrare in un nuovo mondo. E per quello che vidi e capii allora, per quello che rappresentava la resistenza, per la libertà vorrò sempre battermi.' Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, 85, my translation.

⁸⁰ See Manzoni's Diary on 21 April and 15 May 1955, p. 77-78, 129, 191 (endnote n.90).

⁸¹ 'Comunismo e non comunismo. Io ho preso le parti del comunismo, per quel che vi è di valido. E ve ne è molto. Credo però che il comunismo debba rispettare l'individuo e lo spirito di tolleranza e di libertà. (...) Comunque è un bel casino la politica, il mondo.' Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, May 21, 1954, 133-134, my translation.

questioned about his own and fellow artists' political opinions, Manzoni replied: 'Politics? It has no meaning for us, we live in a futuristic world!'.⁸² No further mention of politics appears in Manzoni's subsequent texts. The only reference to the contemporary situation can be seen at the opening of his exhibition in Copenhagen in 1960 when he refused entrance to men with beards, claiming that having a beard in Milan 'was a sign of fascist sympathies'.⁸³

Another mention to the supposed relationship between art and politics appeared in an article in the Danish magazine *Herning Folkeblad* on 6 July 1960, the day after Manzoni had made a 7200m long *Line*. Asked about the relationship between art and revolution and the supposed goal of contemporary art as wanting 'to rebel against the status quo' Manzoni replied: 'I have no answer to this. I have a feeling that our times are no longer reactionary. But if you walk into an art shop and buy books about modern art, you will be told that it is revolutionary. For me that is only true on paper'.⁸⁴ Manzoni's statement makes evident his desire to distance himself and his practice from 'contemporary forms of leftist art', subtly criticising those aspects of socially engaged art experienced by many contemporary artists both in Italy and abroad.⁸⁵ This criticism emerges and becomes evident in his practice. From a theoretical point of view, the interview cited can also be analysed from other perspectives: for example the importance of notions of both 'classicism' as deriving from Croce's aesthetics and freedom as shaped by Kierkegaard.⁸⁶

References to both can be found in the artist's diary entries. The diary offers useful insights not only on Manzoni's juvenile political ideas but also on his philosophy-oriented readings that would shape his future theories and practice. However, if the artist makes explicit mention of Benedetto Croce, I would argue that his allusions to Søren Kierkegaard are more nuanced. The

⁸² Adele Cambria, "Vivono nell'avvenire," *Il Giorno*, June 18, 1957. It's not clear to which 'fellow artists or 'friends'' the journalist leading the interview is referring to.

⁸³ See Jacopo Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool," 75-94.

⁸⁴ Jep., "Søren Kierkegaard is regarded the world over as the foundation of freedom", *Herning Folkeblad*, July 6, 1960, in Jacopo Galimberti, "Piero Manzoni a Herning: 'Non sono un pittore, sono un teorico dialettico'," *Palinsesti*, 1 (2013) 52-53.

⁸⁵ Jacopo Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool," 76.

⁸⁶ Moreover, classicism and revolution do not contradict each other. Classicism is the basis for creating a revolution, in Jacopo Galimberti, "Piero Manzoni a Herning," 53.

artist deliberately established a relationship with the Danish philosopher only a few years later, on the occasion of the interview for the *Herning Folkeblad*. This raises the question: what role does Kierkegaard and particularly his idea of ‘freedom’ play in Manzoni’s understanding and making of ‘art’?

In order to answer this, I will explore firstly how Croce’s aesthetics had an impact on Manzoni’s juvenile ideas and practice; secondly, I will analyse both Kierkegaard’s and Sartre’s references to the idea of ‘freedom’, pointing out similarities and differences and arguing that such idea both Manzoni’s politics of making and the stance assumed by his works.

As noted in his diary on 15 May 1954, Manzoni praises Croce’s philosophy of art, defining it as ‘brilliant’ and ‘fundamental’. Through a close reading of the diary, as suggested by Gaspare Luigi Marcone, is it possible to infer that Croce’s ideas of classicism, myth, intuition and expression are crucial to Manzoni’s education.⁸⁷ Croce asserts that ‘with the definition of art as intuition goes the denial that it has the character of *conceptual knowledge*’, setting up a dichotomy between intuitive or sensuous and conceptual or intellectual knowledge, that can be further exemplified by the difference between the *unreal* and the *real* (and, I would add, the *rational*).⁸⁸

Moreover, the contrast between intuition and concept – and between art and philosophy and history – is further substantiated by the notion of ‘ideality’ as ‘the quintessence of art’, to the point at which Croce’s aesthetics has been labelled as ‘neo-idealistic’.⁸⁹ What follows on from the difference between art and philosophy, which occupies an important position within Croce’s aesthetics, is the distinction between art and myth: ‘Myth manifests itself as the revelation and knowledge of reality as opposed to unreality, along with a rejection of alternative beliefs as illusory and false.’⁹⁰ According to this definition, myth is antagonistic to art and intuition. However intuition cannot be characterised always as ‘artistic’; intuition is artistic only when ruled by a

⁸⁷ See Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, 188 n. 57, 191 n. 90, 195 n. 110, 202 n. 169, 203-204 n. 179-180, 210-211 n. 250-251.

⁸⁸ Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, trans. By Patrick Romanell (New York: the Bobbs-Company)14.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

‘principle’. ‘What is this principle?’ asks Croce.⁹¹ His answer touches upon another fundamental dichotomy, the one between romanticism and classicism. In short, classicism ‘has a tendency towards *representation*’, while romanticism, being its counterpart, ‘has it towards *emotion*’.⁹² Despite the contrast emphasised by Croce between the two ideas, the great work of art – and consequently the great artist – cannot be labelled as either ‘romantic’ or ‘classical’, as it possesses both qualities; it represents something while striving for an outpouring of emotions. The principle that substantiates ‘intuition’ according to Croce is therefore ‘intense feeling’; ‘intuition is such because it expresses intense feeling’.⁹³

From this brief account, it is possible to understand the unruly way in which Manzoni appropriates Croce’s aesthetics. In 1956 Manzoni writes that an ‘artistic fact [...] relies on intuitive awareness’, further labelled as ‘intuitive clarification (*inventio*)’.⁹⁴ The use of the Latin term *Inventio* refers to the first of the Five Canons of Classical Rhetoric (*Inventio*, *Dispositio*, *Elocutio*, *Memoria*, *Actio*) and signifies the discovery of sources or the ‘collection’ of ideas; *De Inventione* is the title of a treatise on Rhetoric written by Cicero in 85 B.C.⁹⁵ Despite the reference to classical tradition, Manzoni’s employment of the term *inventio* has little to do with rhetoric as discipline, and more with Croce’s acknowledgement of ‘intuition’ as an activity that denies a conceptual knowledge.

It can be argued that Manzoni’s *Jungian paintings* (1956) and *Achromes* (from 1957) fulfil Croce’s conception of artistic intuition. The first of these paintings represents, according to Manzoni, ‘morphemes recognizable by all’, while the second series are defined only by their status of ‘being’ – ‘removed’ from any mimetic intent. Both series of works rely on the audience’s intuitive

⁹¹ Ibid., 23.

⁹² Ibid., 23-24.

⁹³ Ibid., 25.

⁹⁴ Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull’arte* (Milano: Abscondita, 2013) 13.

⁹⁵ Interestingly enough one of Manzoni’s early writing is called ‘Towards the discovery of a new zone of images’. Regarding Cicero’s rhetoric see Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (United States: ReadHowYouWant, 2006).

knowledge.⁹⁶ They are substantiated by a ‘universal classical ideal’ that appeals to the ‘collective unconscious’ of the public. This is particularly evident in the *Jungian paintings*, which according to the artist display ‘archetypes identifiable by a community’ and perfectly reflect Croce’s notion of classicism as *representation*.⁹⁷ Regarding the *Achromes*, the reference to classical tradition, often underestimated, can be found in the way in which Manzoni reworks the aspect of their surface, twisting its appearance in between the sculptural plasticity of the marble and the sensuality of Renaissance draperies. As already emphasised, the allusion to a statuesque ideal of classicism is further witnessed by the *Living Sculptures* (1961), often arranged by Manzoni in poses befitting ancient sculptures.

It can be inferred that the Crocean notion of classicism that informs Manzoni’s practice in this phase, which I would label as ‘universal intuition’ – meaning the faculty that allow to universally recognise something, immediate knowledge that passes through the senses – accords with his early Jung-inspired canvases but appears problematic when we consider later series of works such as *Bodies of Air* (1961) or the *Artist’s Shit* (1961). This testifies to an evolution in Manzoni’s appraisal of the classical tradition. The *Achromes* represent in this respect an emblematic case study. On the one hand, these works materialise the idea of sensuous and artistic intuition as opposed to conceptual knowledge. On the other hand, they resist any categorisation, particularly Croce’s notions of both classicism as representation and romanticism as emotion, thus developing a new understanding of classical tradition as ‘universal freedom’.

On the notion of ‘freedom’, Manzoni claims: ‘Søren Kierkegaard is my father; his aim was to free the mind from suspicion (...) Søren Kierkegaard is a father to me because he is regarded the world over as the basis of freedom.’⁹⁸ As can be inferred from this comment, Manzoni’s understanding of ‘freedom’ is indebted to the famous Danish philosopher. Manzoni had read Kierkegaard

⁹⁶ See Piero Manzoni, *l’Arte non è vera creazione* (Art is not true creation, 1957) and *Libera Dimensione* (Free dimension, 1960), in *Scritti sull’arte*, 14-15, 34-38. Manzoni deliberately adopts a Jungian vocabulary as inspired by Jung ideas of archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.

⁹⁷ Croce, *Guide to aesthetics*, 23-24.

⁹⁸ Piero Manzoni quoted in Jacopo Galimberti, “Piero Manzoni a Herning,” 51.

from the volume *On Existentialism* by Pietro Prini, first published in 1952.⁹⁹ Moreover, in those years Kierkegaard was the focus of much Marxist criticism: Georg Lukacs commented upon the Danish philosopher first in an article dated 1953 and later in his famous book *The Destruction of Reason* translated into Italian in 1959.¹⁰⁰ The influential Italian magazine *Il Verri* published a review of the book in 1960.¹⁰¹ The volume *Studi Kierkegaardiani* (Studies on Kierkegaard), which collected the contributions of several scholars, was also published in Italy in 1957. As demonstration of its importance, the reference to the ideal of ‘freedom’ appears in almost all of Manzoni’s writings.

According to Kierkegaard, the human being was created by God *ex-nihilo*. Man and God are therefore bound in a relationship of dependence that only affects man, as God’s omnipotence is limitless. Similarly, Man’s freedom is apparently absolute and unconditioned. Régis Jolivet argues that: ‘The source, the condition and the guarantee of our human freedom lies precisely in the fact that nothing precedes it and that it is constituted in every moment and from nothing (...) Infinity is necessary, as freedom, in its essence, is a kind of infinity.’¹⁰² How is it possible to argue for the infinity of human freedom when man is necessarily subdued to God for being his own creature? This question can be further expanded by arguing on the coexistence between human freedom and God’s omnipotence.

As affirmed by Jolivet, according to Kierkegaard: ‘It is false that our freedom is incompatible with divine omnipotence (as in our times demanded by Sartre) rather, it cannot be explained and justified but by means of that.’¹⁰³ Human freedom is indeed infinite. It emerges from the relation between

⁹⁹ See Jacopo Galimberti, “The intellectual and the fool,” and Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Georg Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: The Merlin Press, 1980) 243–305; “Kierkegaard,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift f.Ä.r Philosophie*, 1 (1953).

¹⁰¹ Mario Forti, “Georg Lukacs: La distruzione della ragione,” *Il Verri*, 3 (1960) 116–20.

¹⁰² ‘La fonte, la condizione e la garanzia della nostra libertà umana sta appunto in ciò, che nulla la precede e che sia costituita in ogni istante e a partire dal nulla (...) occorre l’infinito, poiché la libertà, nella sua essenza, è una specie di infinito.’ Régis Jolivet, “La libertà e l’onnipotenza secondo Kierkegaard,” *Studi Kierkegaardiani*, ed. Cornelio Fabro (Brescia: Marcelliana, 1957) 173, my translation.

¹⁰³ ‘È falso che la nostra libertà sia incompatibile con l’onnipotenza divina (come hai nostri giorni ha preteso Sartre) anzi, essa non può spiegarsi e giustificarsi che mediante quella,’ *ibid.*, my translation.

finitude and infinitude that characterises the self.¹⁰⁴ ‘True freedom consists [...] in appropriating the given and consequently in becoming absolutely dependent through freedom’.¹⁰⁵ However, this status of ‘absolute’ – according to Kierkegaard – freedom inevitably puts man in a continuous state of anguish and despair. This condition is reversible only if man decides to take on what Kierkegaard calls the ‘religious stage’, therefore devoting himself to faith in God.

Jean-Paul Sartre comes into play here for taking up and secularising Kierkegaard’s *humanism*. Indeed, the French philosopher similarly argues that every human action is deeply characterised by an unavoidable despair – that is the anguish that derives from the infinite number of possibilities with which man is constantly faced. Therefore, the unconditioned responsibility that man has over his choices is truly a condemnation, as ‘every responsible act is accomplished in an irrepressible anguish: the despair of doing without God’.¹⁰⁶ Similarly theorised by St. Augustine, who argued for a ‘free will’ as ‘negative freedom’ (that is a state of absolute freedom outside of the divine Grace), according to Sartre human freedom is a distressing vertigo over the abyss of man’s infinite possibilities.

“Man is freedom” says Sartre. [...] then, we may say that existentialism tries to return man to himself as freedom, as possibility and openness to the future, as indeterminate potentiality.¹⁰⁷

Being a creature left to its own devices – and being ‘nothing’ Sartre remarks – man is perpetually condemned to call himself and his actions into question, revealing the absurdity of an unconditioned freedom without Grace.¹⁰⁸ According to Sartre, the suffering that derives from an infinite freedom is a consequence of man’s self-determination. Notably, together with

¹⁰⁴ See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

¹⁰⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 3281/III A11, July 18, 1840, quoted in Steven D. Martz, “Kierkegaard’s reception of Hamann: language, selfhood and reflection,” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2012) 73.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Ogni atto responsabile sorge e si compie in una insopprimibile angoscia: l’angoscia di dover fare a meno di Dio.’ Pietro Prini, *Esistenzialismo* (Roma: ed. Studium, 1972), 171.

¹⁰⁷ John Killinger, ‘Existentialism and Human Freedom,’ *The English Journal*, 50 (1961): 304

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

Croce and Kierkegaard, Sartre also belongs to the corpus of Manzoni's juvenile readings.¹⁰⁹

Manzoni's understanding of 'freedom' echoes the 'existential' background. The artist retains the idea of an absolute freedom, as assumed with differences by both Kierkegaard and Sartre, but discards the inevitable despair that comes with it, postulating a positive freedom. In his writings, Manzoni adopts 'freedom' to qualify not only the dimension and space of the canvas (such as *Free Dimension*, 1960) but artistic practice as well.¹¹⁰ From 1957 to 1961 the reappearance of the term is striking: Manzoni talks about freeing art from 'extraneous and useless gestures', signifying the pictorial dimension as an 'area of freedom' and looking for the 'freedom of invention'.¹¹¹ The insistence on the necessity of freedom affects not only the artistic act but also the artist himself and his perspective. Once the dimension of the canvas is freed from the conviction of academic traditional art, the artist in turn has reached his 'integral freedom', evacuating the constraint of the mind and overcoming what Manzoni calls the 'artistic concern'.¹¹²

The influence of existential philosophy can be discerned not only in regard to the lexicon – as Manzoni frequently addresses the issue of the surface as characterised by 'unlimited possibilities' – but also by analysing his production. The idea of 'infinity', as associated to the number of possibilities undertaken by the artistic object, characterises both the series of the *Achromes* and particularly of the *Lines* (1959). Significantly, Oiticica adopts a comparable manner of qualifying his works – notably using the term 'probabilities' – and similarly stressing the unstable nature of the artistic object as subdued to the participation of the audience, both physically and

¹⁰⁹ The importance of Kierkegaard has been already developed. Re Sartre see Manzoni, *Diario*, 186, n. 52.

¹¹⁰ See "Libera dimensione," in Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull'Arte*, 37.

¹¹¹ See 'L'arte non è vera creazione' (1957), 'La ricerca dell'immagine' (1957), 'La ricerca d'immagine' (1957), 'Albisola Marina' (1957), 'Da oggi il concetto di quadro' (1957), 'Metodo di scoperta' (1957-58), 'Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini' (1958), 'Da Milano' (1959), 'Il verificarsi di nuove condizioni ... [Dada Maino]' (1961), in Piero Manzoni, *Scritti sull'arte*, 14-15, 17-18, 24, 28, 33, 44-45, 60-61, 65, 68, 71.

¹¹² See 'Libera dimensione' (1960), 'L'unica dimensione' (1959-60), *Ibid.*, 37, 68.

conceptually.¹¹³ Concerning the *Lines*, the issue of the relation with the public is rather problematic and intertwined with various other threads. In the following section I discuss the relation between ‘freedom’ and ‘infinity’ as materialised in the *Lines*.

4. The ‘limitless embrace’ of the *Lines*

In each of these *Lines* is predominant the immediate and irrepressible embrace of Kierkegaard’s Eros; a limitless embrace that does not consume itself in experimental sensationalism: a catharsis that repeats itself geometrically beyond the present and the useless expression.¹¹⁴

This statement by Vincenzo Agnetti was published in a small catalogue made on the occasion of the first exhibition of the *Lines* – 4 December 1959 – which in turn inaugurated the Azimut Gallery in Milan founded by Manzoni together with Enrico Castellani. Writer, poet, friend and commentator of Manzoni, Agnetti does not explain much about the *Lines*, either from an aesthetical perspective or in terms of their meaning. However, he wisely connects the *Lines* to Kierkegaard. Although this link could be perceived as arbitrarily established by the critic, it further testifies to the influence of Kierkegaard on Manzoni’s practice. Moreover, most of the *Lines* were executed in Denmark – part of the reason why Manzoni established an affiliation with the Danish philosopher.

From 1959 to 1961 Manzoni drew around seventy black lines on white rolls, which were then sealed them into black cardboard tubes with red labels

¹¹³ ‘The idea of object itself is ambivalent, very different from its original source: the object is a probability, not the result of one probability, but the potentiality of a probability, that can be many – here the probability is a collective term that can turn out into many things, a generic term for a come out in the future, not a close term in itself. Each possibility, inside ‘n’ ones, would manifest in time and space in a special opened way.’ Hélió Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0534/69, 1969. Multiple references to the ‘probabilities’ or ‘possibilities’ of the object can be found also in, among others: *A criação plastic em questão, respostas* ‘Oiticica responds to 25 questions on ‘participation’, AHO/PHO 0159/68, December 1968, *Apocalipoptesis (Apocalipoptese)*, AHO/PHO 0534/69, 1969.

¹¹⁴ ‘In ognuna di queste linee è predominante l’abbraccio immediato è irrefrenabile dell’eros kierkegaardiano [sic]; un abbraccio smisurato che non consuma nel sensismo sperimentale: una catarsi che si ripete geometricamente al di là del presente e dell’inutile esprimere.’ Vincenzo Agnetti, “Piero Manzoni: le Linee,” Milano, 1959, quoted in Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, 177, n. 5, my translation.

giving the date of completion and the length of the line.¹¹⁵ The length indeed constitutes the title of the work. Noting the constant search for a classical ideal, art historian Kirby Gookin defines the link between the *Lines* and the basic principles of Renaissance art, line and drawing as follows:

By isolating a line as both material and subject, Manzoni was evoking the artistic principle of *disegno*, a five-century-old Italian Renaissance theory of art that is grounded in drawing. As outlined by Giorgio Vasari, this theory of artistic creation posits line and drawing (rather than colour) as the material and process that comprise the fundamental idea, or *concetto*, of a work of art. (...) *Disegno* is the “animating principle of all creative processes” (...) Manzoni’s *Lines* maintain their pure, unadulterated identity and therefore engage Vasari’s precept of *disegno*.¹¹⁶

The *Lines* can be seen therefore under a double and complementary perspective: firstly as a process of erasing the pictorial dimension in order to return to basic principles, to the skeleton of the composition; secondly as a means of constructing from scratch and/or as embodying the first sign of creation after zero.

The *Achromes* are emptied canvases that materialise the ‘zero of creation’ by making of ‘nothingness’ a tangible artistic object. Following on from this, the *Lines* are literally the signs that fill the void previously created on the pictorial surface. Therefore, as reflective of the Italian classical tradition, they embody the condition of every artistic composition. The minimalist interpretation of the *Lines* as key forms and concepts of creation is, however, reductive as it only partially manifests the meaning conveyed by these works. Indeed, if much of Manzoni’s early production refers to Croce’s ideal of ‘artistic intuition’ as opposed to ‘intellectual understanding’, this series signifies a reversal. As already explained, the *Lines* are sealed inside tubes of various dimensions. They are therefore hidden from the audience’s sight; what Manzoni allows to be seen is only the packaging – the black cardboard tubes

¹¹⁵ The only exceptions are the Linea m.1140 and the Linea m.1000 (1961) closed in vacuum-sealed stainless steel canisters. The Linea m. 7200 (1960) is packed in a lead container. The tube that contains a ‘Linea di Lunghezza Infinita’ (a Line of Infinite Length, 1960) is made of wood. Cf. Piero Manzoni, *Piero Manzoni* (New York: Hirschl & Adler Modern, 1990) 53-56.

¹¹⁶ Kirby Gookin, “Manzoni’s Lines,” in *Piero Manzoni*, 56.

with the red labels. 'THEY ARE ABSOLUTELY NOT TO BE OPENED', the artist insisted.¹¹⁷ These works therefore demand a conceptual engagement, as the public needs to trust the author and imagine something that is not immediately visible. The process of making the *Lines* could be seen only in black and white photographic reportages which portrayed Manzoni busy at work.¹¹⁸ The paradox is even more glaring if we acknowledge the *Infinite Line*: a conceptual ideal sealed inside a tube [fig. 4.10].¹¹⁹ Manzoni would state:

Why should one worry about how to arrange a line in space? Composed form, forms in space, spatial depth, all these problems are remote. A long line stretching to infinity can only be drawn beyond the concerns of the composition and dimensions: in total space dimensions do not exist.¹²⁰

The *Lines*' infinite length destabilises notions of space and time. 'Time is something different from what the hands of a clock measure' writes Manzoni 'and the *Linea* does not measure metres or kilometres, but is zero, not zero as the end, but as the beginning of an infinite series'.¹²¹ Bearing this in mind, I claim that the *Lines* 'free' not only the pictorial surface but also the canonical understanding of the notion of 'dimension' itself, challenging traditional hierarchies affecting concepts of space and time. I therefore argue that Manzoni consciously borrows from Kierkegaard's notions of 'freedom' and

¹¹⁷ Manzoni to Jes Petersen: "Importante: LE SCATOLE DELLE LINEE SONO SIGILLATE: NON BISOGNA APRIRE, MA ESPORLE E VENDERLE COSÌ, IN SCATOLA CHIUSA!! NON APRIRE ASSOLUTAMENTE!" [sic]. Unpublished correspondence, Manzoni Archive, Milan, quoted in John Thomas McGrath, "Body, Subject, Self," 9. There has been hypothesised that one of the reason for which the tubes had to remained closed was that the *Lines* were executed on photosensitive paper, as Piero Manzoni himself affirms in a letter to Otto Piene: 'La ligne est en papier que change avec la lumière' from the Otto Piene archive, *ibid.*, 211, note 263.

¹¹⁸ See Piero Manzoni working on the 7,200 metre long line in the Herning Avis daily newspaper's printing works in Herning, Denmark, 1960, photographs reproduced on Martin Engler, ed., "Piero Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art," (Frankfurt am Main: Städel Museum, 2013) 98-99, 253.

¹¹⁹ 'Recently I have executed a line of Infinite length, but this one also has its defects. It is necessary to keep the tube that contains it perfectly closed, because if you open it, the line will disappear', Piero Manzoni quoted in John Thomas McGrath, "Body, Subject, Self," 13.

¹²⁰ Piero Manzoni, 'Free Dimension' (1960), reproduced in Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni* (London: Serpentine Trust; Milan: Charta, 1998) 131.

¹²¹ Jep. (Peter Jepsen), "*Søren Kierkegaard is regarded the world over as the foundation of freedom*", *op. cit.* reproduced in Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni*, 128. N.B. the translation of the interview provided by Jacopo Galimberti reads slightly differently: '(...) time is something completely different. (...) This line is not a centimetre or a metre. The line is Zero, it is not the end. A zero is not a closed whole. Like the line, it is both a beginning and a series without an end.' Jacopo Galimberti, "Piero Manzoni a Herning," 52.

‘infinity’, giving them a twist. As argued above, the artist employs notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘infinity’ to describe the properties of the art object, but deprives the former of what Kierkegaard and Sartre saw as one of its fundamental constituents, the state of despair. According to existentialism, freedom is absolute and unconditioned, as limitless is the concept grounding the making of the *Lines*. However, freedom is necessarily bound to suffering, which makes its condition ‘negative’, thus revealing the futility of its existence. ‘So my liberty devours my freedom’ claims Sartre.¹²² Manzoni removes from existential freedom the inevitable state of anguish that derives from it and shapes a novel understanding of it that is both *anarchic*, because it subverts traditional ways of conceiving space and time, and *constructive*, because it materialises a new beginning.

Nicola Abbagnano has already remarked on the connection between freedom and anarchy, arguing that: ‘The political equivalent of the conception of freedom as self-causality is freedom as the absence of conditions or rules, resistance to any obligation and, in a word, *anarchy*.’¹²³ Sometimes from the excess of freedom that generates an anarchic situation tyranny or slavery emerges, as acknowledged by Plato in the *Republic*, who sees anarchy as a lack of democracy.¹²⁴ Conversely, closer to Manzoni’s understanding of freedom is Max Stirner’s comprehension of the human being as addressed in *The Ego and Its Own* (1844): an individual that having no causes outside itself becomes both his own principle and the principle of everything.¹²⁵ It can therefore be inferred that for Manzoni ‘freedom’ has a positive value, being connected to the same ‘constructive’ inclination that, I argue, distinguishes his artistic production. As demonstrated, the research for a state of ‘freedom’ can be interpreted also from a political perspective. Manzoni celebrated freedom from Nazi occupation in his diary. In the same pages the artist blames the Communist Party as well for

¹²² Jean-Paul Sartre, “L’être et le néant,” 560, quoted in Nicola Abbagnano, *Dizionario di Filosofia* (Torino: Tipografia Torinese S.P.A., 1964) 512, my translation.

¹²³ ‘L’equivalente politico della concezione della libertà come auto casualità è la libertà come assenza di condizioni o di regole, rifiuto d’ogni obbligazione e, in una parola, anarchia.’ Ibid., my translation.

¹²⁴ See Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 563.

¹²⁵ See Abbagnano, *Dizionario di Filosofia*, 513. This is closer to Sartre’s understanding of man as self-determined.

not respecting ‘individual freedom’.¹²⁶ Therefore, despite what Manzoni claims, his acknowledgment of artistic ‘freedom’ also possesses a strong tie to the contemporary socio-political context.¹²⁷

4.1 Anarchism in the ‘Age of Mechanical Reproduction’

There is another point of view that I want to discuss which concerns my analysis of the *Lines*: Manzoni’s focus on the process of making. The *Lines* were only occasionally exhibited and shown to the public outside of their boxes.¹²⁸ However, they can be seen in photographs of the time – showing Manzoni carefully dedicated to their making and endlessly repeating a mechanical gesture – and in two of Manzoni’s film shorts: a newsreel produced by the *Filmgiornale* SEDI and a documentary titled *0 x 0 = Kunst. Maler Ohne Farbe und Pinsel* made by Gerard Winker in 1962. The latter records Manzoni executing a *Line* by using a machine that rotates to unfold a long scroll of paper with a sign imbued with ink.¹²⁹ Scholar John Thomas McGrath claims that ‘Manzoni’s work continually solicits this social relation by inscribing the production and consumption of art within the apparatus of industrial image’, therefore adding a socio-political significance. From a Marxist perspective, this particular focus can be read as a commentary on artistic labour as a condition of alienation and capitalist exploitation.

Conversely, comparing and contrasting the *Lines* with Robert Rauschenberg’s *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) [fig. 4.11], created with the tyre of a Ford Model A, Martin Engler argues for the ‘subjective’ dimension of

¹²⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁷ The connection between Manzoni’s praise of ‘freedom’ and the contemporary social context, particularly in reference to the Cold War, has already been stressed at the end of chapter 2.

¹²⁸ Notable exceptions are Manzoni’s solo exhibition at the Pozzetto Chiuso in Albisola, 18-24 August 1959, where the Line Long 19,93 m was damaged by some unknown vandals (Cf. “Vandali,” *Il Diario di Milano*, September 5, 1959, 9) and the exhibition ‘Le Linee di Piero Manzoni’ at Azimut gallery, Milan, 4-24 December 1959, where the shortest Line was shown outside the tube as reported by the journalist Leonardo Borgese in the exhibition review published on the ‘Corriere della Sera’ (Leonardo Borgese, “Al di là dell’estremo astrattismo. Il pittore che “crea” linee a metratura. Variano da trentatré a quattro metri, e costano, secondo la lunghezza, da 25 mila a 80 mila lire– ma alla mostra ne è esposta solo la più corta; le altre, per mancanza di spazio, sono arrotolate,” *Corriere della Sera*, dicembre 16, 1959, 3).

¹²⁹ See Francesca Pola, “Manzoni in film, the Immaterial Body of the Idea,” in Engler *Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art*, 157-167.

both these works. Stating that ‘the subjective expression, the gesture in its extreme reduction becomes the sole, emphatically heightened subject of the *Lines*’, Engler emphasises Manzoni’s lack of interest in the ‘imprint of a machine’.¹³⁰ Taking into consideration both points of view, I argue that it is neither Manzoni’s concern to give a commentary on artistic labour nor to call attention to the subjectivity of the artistic gesture alone. On the contrary, the *Lines*, together with other series of works, namely the *Bodies of Air* (1959-1960) and the *Artist’s Shit* (1961), insist on the issues of seriality and repetition of multiples that lead towards ‘an impersonal and non-expressive style of production’.¹³¹

This perspective is also supported by Germano Celant, who stresses the ‘repetitiveness’ of the gesture of constructing the *Lines*, ‘which seems to annul all manual activity – as in the case of someone using the electronic printer today’.¹³² The seriality attributed to Manzoni’s politics of making that blurs the boundaries between originality and multiplicity contradicts Boris Groys’ thesis. Groys, while discussing the work *Song for Lupita* (1998) by Francis Alÿs argues that:

The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. A documented activity is not anymore a unique isolated performance – an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now’.¹³³

Groys implicitly confers on performance art in the sixties the extra value of originality because of the uniqueness of its happenings – a suggestion utterly contested by Manzoni’s *modus operandi*. In terms of visual analysis, the figure of Manzoni at work resembles the character performed by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936), with whom Manzoni shares the tragicomic attitude of

¹³⁰ Engler, *Piero Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art*, 23-24.

¹³¹ See Germano Celant interviewed by Massimiliano Gioni, *Ibid.*, 78. Re the discourse on ‘multiples’, I am starting from Galimberti’s speculations on it, as it can be read in “Piero Manzoni: the Intellectual and the Fool.”

¹³² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³³ Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” *e-flux-Journal* #11, 12/2009, accessed February 8, 2016, URL <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/>.

the comedian and the role of provocateur. However, if in staging the prototype of the alienated twentieth-century worker, Chaplin's character was subjected to the out-of-control speed of modern machines, Manzoni seems to master and celebrate new forms of technologies to the point of advocating an interaction between these new appliances and the practice of art, thus echoing contemporary experiments in kinetic art.¹³⁴

In addition to the excitement of advancements in technology is Manzoni's focus on the issues of seriality and reproduction to such an extreme that 'the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility'.¹³⁵ Examples of multiples are *Bodies of Air* and *Artist's Shit*. The 'pneumatic sculptures' of *Bodies of Air*, which were followed in rapid succession by *Artist's Breath* (1960) [fig. 4.12], are forty-five kits containing a white balloon, a tripod and a mouthpiece. The buyer is free to choose whether to leave these tools enclosed in the wooden box or to inflate the balloon and put it on the tripod following the instructions left by the artist. For the price of 200 lire per litre, the balloon could be blown up by the artist himself. Before exhibiting these works at the Azimut Gallery in Milan, Manzoni had recorded the making of *Bodies of Air* in a newsreel of the *Filmgiornale SEDI*, the only Manzoni's short film that survives.¹³⁶

As already described, *Artist's Shit* consisted of little yellowish and black sealed tins, carrying the words: 'Artist's Shit, contents: 30 gr net, freshly preserved, produced and tinned in May 1961'. The packaging strongly resembled the 'Manzontin' brand of luncheon meat, which was very popular in Italy at that time. The artist's signature appears on the lid of each can, numbered from 001 to 090. Notably, the cans supposedly containing the artist's

¹³⁴ Manzoni's *Scultura nello Spazio* and *Corpo di Luce Assoluto* (Sculpture in Space and Absolute Body of Light, 1960, lost works; they appear in the already mentioned documentary by Gerard Winkler 1962) and his projects for both the *Placetarium* and the 'mechanical creature' (see Piero Manzoni, "Some Realizations, Some Experiments, Some Projects," in Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni* 220-223) as well as the *Lines* show the influence of Jean Tinguely's kinetic works, of whom Manzoni was great admirer.

¹³⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," accessed May 25, 2016, URL <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

¹³⁶ 'Corpi d'Aria di Piero Manzoni', Azimut Gallery, Milan, 3-9 May 1960; *Filmgiornale SEDI* n. 1020, 'Aree e sfere di gomma per Opera d'arte,' (Areas and Rubber Sphere as Work of Art), directed by Giampaolo Maccentelli, December 1959.

feces were sold at the same exchange rate of gold, creating a direct bond with the fluctuation of the stock market. The act of enclosing the artist's excrement in a tin, in between shock and 'madness', had considerable impact on public opinion and was an immediate success with buyers.¹³⁷

Anarchically assaulting the traditional notion of the art object, both series of works engage with several other themes beyond issues of seriality and multiplicity. In the case of the *Bodies of Air*, the required participation of the audience stands out: the owner assumes an autonomous role and has complete freedom in respect to the work he has bought, to the point of deciding whether to assemble and 'activate' it or not. Hand in hand with the increased participation of the public goes the progressive collapse of the figure of the artist, whose sovereignty seems inevitably undermined.

At the same time, the use of inexpensive, mass produced and cheap materials creates a gap between the status of work of art arbitrarily designated by the artist and the actual value of the work. In Marxist terminology, the artist is not paid any more for his labour which is now passed to the hands of the buyer. This inevitably problematises Marxist categories of 'use-value' and 'exchange-value'. *Artist's Shit* takes this paradox to the extreme: Manzoni attributes a fictitious value to something that has no 'use-value', or rather, is completely 'devaluated' in that it constitutes the waste in excesses of the human body. He therefore calls attention to both the art market, which works according to arbitrary rules, and the relentlessly increasing commercialisation of its products. 'You should know that sooner or later artists fall into the trap of a salesman. Within a few years, I too will be commercialised' affirmed Manzoni.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ See Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, "Una grande mostra DADA a Milano. L'elogio della follia di Piero Manzoni," *l'Avanti!*, August 20, 1966, 3; Romano F. Cattaneo, "Il barattolo dell'arte, un campione del nostro tempo," *Il Borghese*, September 21, 1961, 100. The *Artist's Shit* was exhibited in 1971 at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. Palma Bucarelli, at that time director of the Galleria, was subjected to a point of order by Guido Berardi, a Christian-Democrat (DC) deputy. Cf. Flaminio Gualdoni, *Breve storia della "Merda d'Artista"* (Milano: Skira, 2014).

¹³⁸ Piero Manzoni quoted in Franco Serra, "Costa duecento lire al litro: il fiato del pittore che non usa pennelli," *Settimana Icom Illustrata*, December 16, 1962, 51 quoted and translated by McGrath, "Body, Subject, Self," 311.

Quoting Dalì, and implicitly ascribing his gesture to a Dadaist mockery, with regard to the relation between the socio-economic system and Manzoni's practice, Engler suggests:

By defining 'gold and shit [as] one and the same thing' (to quote Salvador Dalì), Manzoni was making reference to the capitalist value system on the one hand while offering a commentary on the state of affairs of the Western consumer society on the other.¹³⁹

Although I subscribe to the interpretation of Manzoni dissecting the capitalist value system, I do not agree with the premise that a commentary on contemporary society and its obsession with commodities is the main focus of these works. Manzoni is not only fascinated by industrial progress, but is moreover quite resistant to the appropriation of discourses belonging to an orthodox Marxist criticism.. Furthermore, he seems considerably dismissive of that critical attitude oriented towards a socio-economic background embraced by current artists. It can be therefore argued that Manzoni's practice advances through an 'ironic self-inquisition', a *sui generis* parody of the idolisation of the artist, without actually undermining his authoritarian position. Equally Manzoni never completely challenged the notion of 'authenticity' that has traditionally characterised the work of art, but rather he combined the creation of multiples with the original touch of the artist – what is more intimate than his own excrement or breath? Thereby he challenges Benjamin's idea according to which 'the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' that 'ceases to be applicable to artistic production', reversing the alleged tension between originality and serial reproduction.¹⁴⁰

Although the creation of multiples can be interpreted as questioning both the élitism affecting the art system and its market and as 'a way to humanise capitalism from within', I argue for an antithetical perspective.¹⁴¹ Manzoni's series of works not only manifest a constructive attitude but they also enact a twofold mockery: of the presumed 'death of the author' emphasised by

¹³⁹ Engler, ed., *Piero Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art*, 194.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin, "The work of art".

¹⁴¹ See Galimberti, "The Intellectual and the Fool," 85

contemporary criticism, and of the avant-garde artist himself or herself, trapped in modernist utopias and aiming for a democratisation of both art institutions and the art object itself.¹⁴²

5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined Manzoni's and Oiticica's 'political concerns', considering to what extent their practices are consciously or unconsciously affected by socio-political issues of their time.

In the case of Oiticica I have focused on the idea of 'marginality' and the impact it has not only on Oiticica but also on his fellow artists. From my discussion, Oiticica's dealing with this notion emerges as problematic: on the one hand, the artist was willing to commit himself to an experimental behaviour and to the precepts of an 'aesthetics of the margins'; on the other hand, he was influenced by the glamour of the pop culture dominating the North American artistic scene, thus blurring the boundaries between the two realms.

In the case of Manzoni, his political stance is similarly difficult to unfold. I have argued that it revolves around the notion of 'freedom'. The idea of freedom can appropriate both anarchic and constructive implications: it dismantles categories of space and time while prompting a new start from what was previously erased. Ultimately, I have attended to Manzoni's treatment of concepts of 'reproduction' and 'multiples' as part of his (anti-)political commitment. In this respect, Manzoni's political commitment is conveyed in a twofold antithetical parody of the mythologising of the artist and simultaneously of his presumed 'death'. Manzoni's satire is also directed towards the attempts to democratise the art system pursued by much 'socially engaged' art. He therefore enacts a critique of the utopian ideals of modernist legacy that was still shared by many avant-garde artists.¹⁴³

¹⁴² On the 'death of the author' see my discussion around Eco and Haroldo de Campos in chapter 3 and my analysis on Barthes in chapter 2.

¹⁴³ On Parody and pastiche see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

Illustrations



Fig. 4.1 Hélio Oiticica & Neville Dalmeida, *Cosmococa 5 Hendrix War*, 1973, mixed media. Inhotim Collection.



Fig. 4.2 Hélio Oiticica, *Visitors in Eden*, Whitechapel Gallery, 1969. Photo by John Goldblatt.

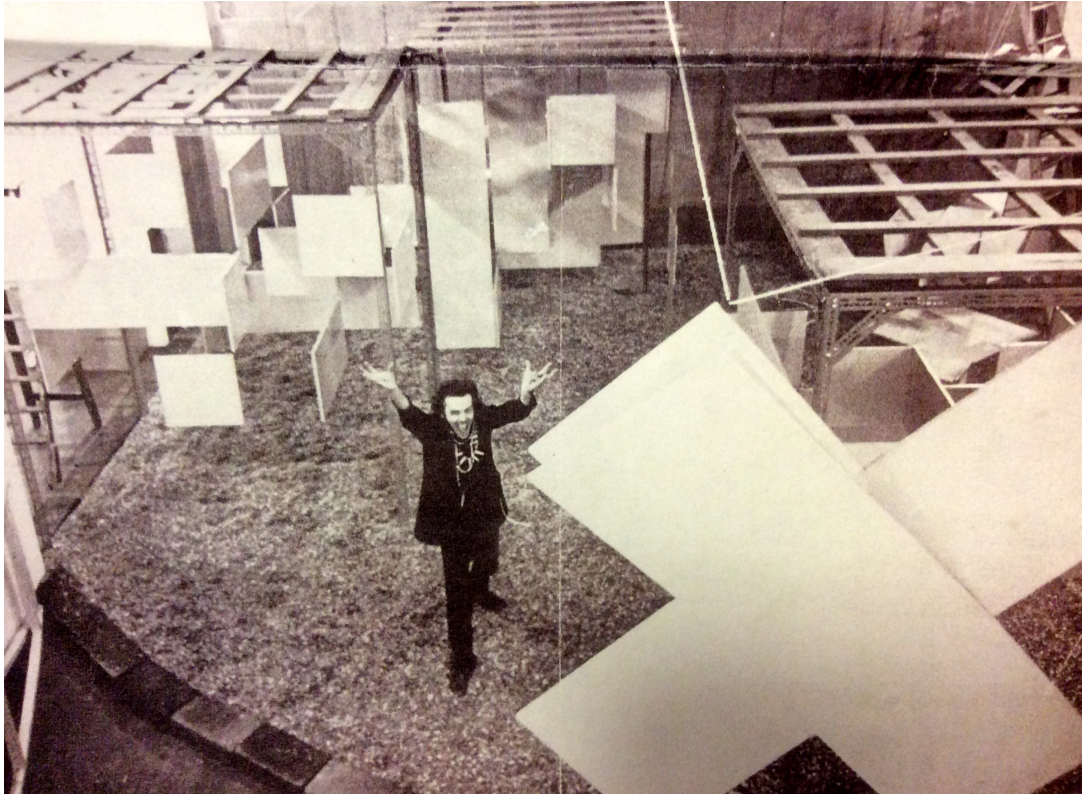


Fig. 4.3 Hélio Oiticica in *Eden*, 1969, Whitechapel Gallery. Courtesy of Whitechapel Archive.

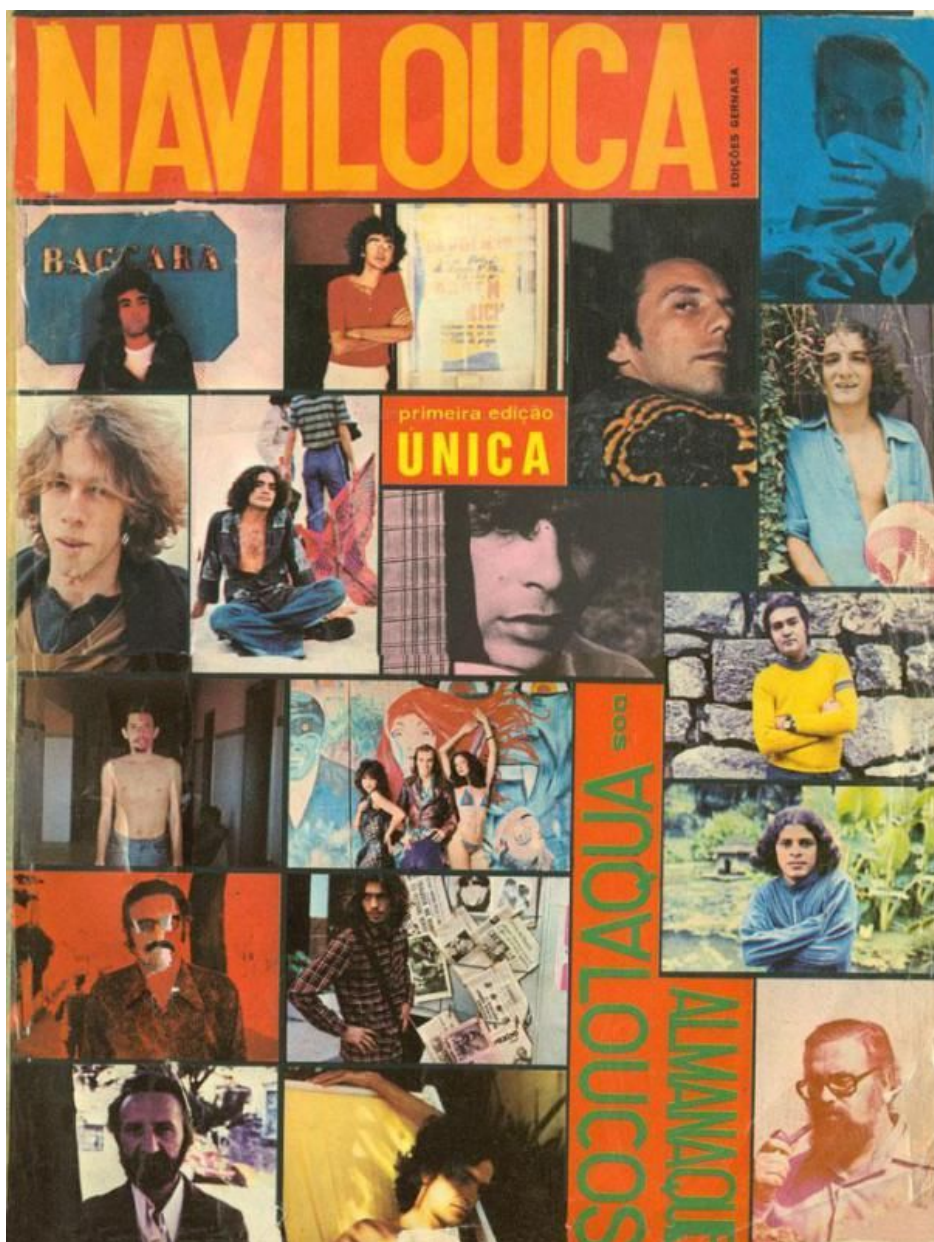


Fig. 4.4 *Navilouca*, 1974, edited by Torquato Neto & Waly Salomão, front cover. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica.



Fig. 4.5 Hélio Oiticica, film still from *Agrippina è Roma-Manhattan*, 1972, reproduced in *Navilouca*, 1974. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica.



Fig. 4.6 Hélio Oiticica, *Bólido-Caixa 18 B33*
"Homenagem a Cara di Cavalo", 1965-66,
 mixed media, Collection Gilberto Chateaubriand,
 Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro.

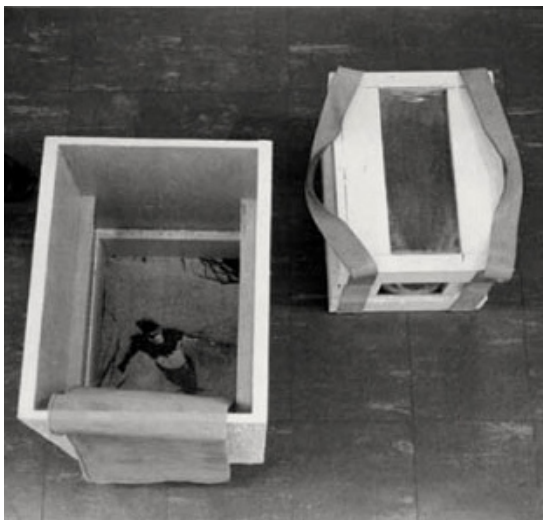


Fig. 4.7 Hélio Oiticica, *Bolide-Caixa 21 B44*, 1966-67.



Fig. 4.8 Artur Barrio, *Bloody Bundles* in the exhibition 'Do corpo à terra', Belo Horizonte, 1970.



Fig. 4.9 Giorgio Mistretta, "Gli affari dell'Antiproces (The Affairs of the Antiproces)," *Lo Specchio*, June 26, 1961. Courtesy of Biblioteca Comunale Centrale, Milano.



Fig. 4.10 Piero Manzoni, *Linea di Lunghezza Infinita* (Infinite Line), 1960, sculpture, ink, paper and wooden cylinder. Private collection.



Fig. 4.11 Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, monoprint:house paint on twenty sheets of paper, mounted on fabric, 41.9 x 671.8 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 4.12 Piero Manzoni, *Fiato d'artista* (Artist's Breath), 1960, rubber balloon, string, lead seal, brass, wood, 18 x 18 cm. Private collection.

Epilogue

1. 'The count-down when rockets take off'

This thesis aimed to revise some popular sites of discourse as well as the dichotomic oppositions between centre and periphery, mainstream and marginal, and north and south and so forth as acknowledged by much art historical literature. It does so by establishing a transnational dialogue between Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica. In turn, such conversation prompts a critical re-understanding of both artists' practice and the creation of a new frame of investigation – a degree zero aesthetics – to avoid the (ab)use of certain aesthetic categories. Furthermore, this analysis challenges and problematises notions of participation and politics in the sixties, unfolding new narratives that question contemporary literature on these matters. The specific choice of these artists reflects important commonalities: the complexity of their projects, their social identity, and how their practice critically responds to a 'degree zero art', an idea that I have shaped from Barthes's notion of 'degree zero writing'. Questioning both modernist and postmodernist discourses, the critical evaluation of their practice enables the review of dogmatic aesthetic categories used in art historical narratives and the development of a new theoretical frame. Moreover, Manzoni and Oiticica's belonging to different national and cultural contexts results in the creation of a transnational comparison that confers a fresh perspective on the appraisal of their practice itself.

Alongside a project of 'deconstruction' and criticism, I have attempted to 'construct' a novel reading their work through the lens of a degree zero model of investigation. I borrow the concept of 'zero' from both the definition given by the German Zero group - 'Zero is the incommensurable zone in which the old state turns into the new' - and Barthes' understanding of it.¹ According to Barthes, 'zero' is a mutable concept: it defines a colourless mode of writing that is however loaded with further significations. It therefore varies in between a constructive nature and a neutral essence. I therefore acknowledge 'zero' as a zone of silence that prompts a new beginning not only in aesthetics but also in

¹ Otto Piene, "The development of the Group Zero," *Times Literary Supplement* (1964): 3.

ontological terms, prompting a new appraisal of the state of the work of art. It also explains a series of shifts – from old to new values, from mimesis to performance, from annihilation to infinity, from utopia to dystopian satire – that characterised the post-war period. Manzoni's and Oiticica's projects embody these shifts. Notably, in the first part of this thesis I identified and analysed two works, Manzoni's *Achromes* and Oiticica's *Parangolés* as symbols of a zero poetic. I argued that both works achieve and display a zero aesthetics by following different dialectical trajectories.

Achromes epitomise the tension between the survival of a lyrical symbolism and the void conveyed by a *tabula rasa* of creation. They emerge as emblems of a fresh start following Manzoni's informal paintings. The analysis of the different sub-series that constitute the series of the *Achromes* facilitates the understanding of the constructive process at the basis of this work, characterised by a shift from an empty canvas to a 'sculptural' one. In this process of annihilation and subsequent construction, in between destruction and resurrection, the *Achromes* reach a 'zero point' of creation. They do not try to convey any aesthetic value or superimposed meaning; they do convey *nothingness*. In the making of 'zero' into a work of art, Manzoni institutionalised anti-aestheticisms.

Parangolés develop from the heritage of abstract constructivism, retaining the use of bright colours. However, dismantling traditional aesthetic categories – they are not paintings, sculptures or architectures, but a fusion of all three – *Parangolés* emerge via the combination of folkloric elements in conjunction with a new aesthetics. I argue that these capes take on the form of 'zero' works of art, since the parallelism with earlier or contemporary practice wouldn't generate a productive comparison. The 'newness' attributed to these works – which legitimised the label of 'zero' works of art – becomes apparent if we analyse them according to different perspectives. Not only do *Parangolés* resist the process of institutionalisation, but they also disrupt the authorship of the artist by allowing the participation of the spectator. When worn by samba dancers in the Mangueira shantytown, the *Parangolé* capes formed a bridge with local communities, attempting to make visible the Afro-Brazilian

minority. Therefore, in making this work Oiticica ascribes to the art system a socio-political intent. Since they revolutionise the canonical understanding of the art object from both an aesthetic and a social perspective, *Parangolé* capes develop from 'zero' state of invention.

Both the *Achromes* and the *Parangolés* epitomised degree zero aesthetics. At the same time, they seek to negotiate with tradition, connecting influences from abroad with local motives. The first part of this thesis has therefore addressed both ideas: a degree zero aesthetics, used as a frame to understand the *raison d'être* of these works; and the notion of *aufhebung*, literally 'sublation', to express the dialectical movement that explains the emergence of these works from previous series. The final outcome of the discourse around zero sees both works, the *Achromes* and the *Parangolé*, as founded on a paradox. As 'zero' works of art they advocate for a fresh start, questioning what has preceded them; yet they do not reject the past as a whole, but incorporate elements from local traditions.

2. Anarchic participation

The second part of this thesis challenged existing narratives on participation in relation to contemporary art. Furthermore, it problematized the relation between art and politics. Again, examining Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice has allowed me to evaluate critically both issues. Umberto Eco's semiological model based on the openness of the work of art in the contemporaneity – expressed in *The Open Work* (1962) and in *The Art Definition* (1968) – displayed a contrasting understanding of the inclusion of the spectator in both Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice. The juxtaposition of their participatory works, such as Oiticica's *Parangolé* capes and Manzoni *Living Sculptures*, has originated pairs of opposing values: dance versus stillness, empathy versus alienation, and collective versus individuality. Approaching their participatory works through a semiological frame is important because it permits not only the coexistence of multiple readings, but also the criticism of current literature

on this matter championed by scholars such as Bishop and Kester, among others.

According to this model, any communication with the audience generates a relation of fruition between the work of art and the public (its user). This leads to a twofold division of the role of the participant: the 'executor', who has a physical and unmediated engagement with the work and the 'user' who experiences only an aesthetic and cognitive involvement. According to this dichotomy, the analysis of Manzoni's *Living Sculptures* and Oiticica's *Parangolés* prompts a twofold outcome. On the one hand, Manzoni denies any physical free fruition of the work, as the audience actually participating in the work has a passive experience of it. On the other, reifying the audience's bodies, the artist makes the public aware of the limits of participation itself, disproving the equation between participation and democratisation of the art system proposed by much literature on this matter. In this respect, Oiticica displays a less satirical but much more utopian view, since he attributes to the *Parangolés* the power of emancipating the role of the public. The spectator indeed becomes a participator and the author shifts from being a creator to assuming the role of instigator of creation. However, by splitting the role of the audience into passive and active positions, Oiticica's practice risks aestheticising a certain minority, by making a spectacle of it.

The last chapter questioned the political connotations displayed in Manzoni's and Oiticica's oeuvre, concurrently reassessing the notion of 'politics' itself. My analysis takes into consideration three different registers: the political background, the politics of making and the political implications at stake in their works. Developing a political understanding of their projects has been quite a challenge for several reasons, in primis because none of their works could be seen as straightforwardly political, as engaging with the actual government in a direct way. Regarding Oiticica, his political standpoint merges with a 'marginal' perspective, or rather, with an attention to 'marginality'. To this matter, I have taken into consideration three case studies that show the link between Oiticica and Brazilian political and cultural marginality. Particularly the last case of study, the exhibition 'do corpo à terra' ('From the Body to the

Earth', 1970), problematises the relation between Oiticica and a so-called 'aesthetics of the margins', emphasising an incongruity with fellow Brazilian artists and an unconscious fascination for pop culture.

Manzoni's (non-)political commitment has been equally difficult to pin down. Manzoni's idea of freedom emerges from an existential background, borrowing part of its meaning from the understandings of Kierkegaard and Sartre. However, Manzoni confers upon it a significant twist, acknowledging 'freedom' as both *infinite* – in line with Existentialism – but *constructive* in accordance with the implications resulting from his works. The 'freedom' that informs the politics of making of the *Lines* becomes apparent in their power of dismantling notions of space and time. Equally arbitrary is the price assigned to *Artist's Shit* – sold at the same price as gold – that creates a gap between 'use-value' and 'exchange-value'. Moreover, both *Bodies of Air* and *Artist's Shit* play upon issues of reproducibility and seriality. This rejects Benjamin's assumption that the presence of an original is the prerequisite of the authenticity of artistic production, since authenticity ceases to exist in contemporary art practice. On the contrary, these series of works are concurrently both mechanically reproduced and 'original', containing the traces of the artist.²

3. *Marginal notes... - Towards further research*

The notion of 'polysemy' has emerged from this dissertation as the most appropriate to define not only Manzoni's and Oiticica's projects but also aesthetic categories frequently used to examine these practices, questioning and problematising historiographical appraisal of both the artists and of such categories. From this investigation multiple studies could emerge. For example, it would be possible to do further research with a view to a novel evaluation of the vocabulary used to define Latin American Art, a theoretical re-reading already begun by scholars Gerardo Mosquera and Michael Asbury, among others. Or it could open up new research on the role played by the

² See Benjamin, "The work of art."

experimental workshop at the Engenho de Dentro, central to the birth of the Concretist movement in Brazil, a theme partially discussed by sociologist Glaucia Villas Bôas. Equally, the Milan-based Nuclear movement in the fifties, especially the position of Enrico Baj in that context, deserves further attention, prompting a historical reinterpretation of Italian post-war practices not only in comparison to European trends, but within a more international outlook. The dialogue between Manzoni and Oiticica that this thesis has attempted to establish indicates the emergence of a new methodology that exceeds a constrained nationalistic approach and resists monolithic historiographical categories that have articulated these practices upon a series of oppositions (north versus south, mainstream versus marginal, centre versus periphery and so forth).

One last interesting thread that deserves further reflection concerns the supposed marginality that haunted the figure of these artists during their lifetimes. Part of my research in Brazil and Italy has been dedicated to this issue, which is still worthy of further study: the myth of the marginalisation of the artist is one of the most popular trends that have characterised the generation of post-war art critics and their making of art history. Oiticica himself often adopts the term ‘marginal’ to describe his own practice:

Oiticica explicitly laid claim to and rigorously assumed the complexity of these scenes of intervention, as well as the marginality of the conditions of production and distribution of his work within the national and international artistic context of this period.³

The myth of Oiticica as ‘marginal’ artist is not a recent literary creation. Surveying the Brazilian press from Oiticica’s lifetime until now, the label ‘marginal artist’ appears quite often.⁴ This inevitably opens up a series of

³ Rina Carvaj, Catherine David, Susan Martin, et al., *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Geco, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel*, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 179.

⁴ Harry Laus, “Oiticica: Marginal da Arte,” *Jornal do Brasil*, July 20, 1966; Isa Cambarà, “A Arte Audaciosa de Um Marginal,” *Lux Jornal*, February 3, 1986; Wilson Coutinho, “O Marginal Iluminado,” *Veja*, February 5, 1986; Fabio Altman, “Da Marginal a Hero,” *Veja*, June 10, 1992; Geórgia Lobacheff, “A Arte Marginal de Oiticica,” *Jornal da Tarde*, September 26, 1994; Antonio Gonçalves Filho, “Da Marginal a Herói,” *Estado de São Paulo*, January 30, 2016, etc.

queries: what does it mean to say that Oiticica was a ‘marginal artist’? ‘Marginal’ in respect to what? Who established this marginal condition?

The first to qualify Oiticica as ‘marginal’ was the Brazilian writer and art critic Harry Laus (1922-1992) in what has become a famous article published in the *Jornal do Brasil* in 1966. Notably, the critic outlines the definition of ‘marginal man’ as follows:

An individual that lives across two cultures in conflict, or that, having been deprived of a culture, never integrated himself completely in the other, staying at the margin of the two cultures.⁵

Laus describes Oiticica’s condition as such, adding that ‘this is what he [Oiticica] says, even when he divides his life in between the normal work in an office and the coexistence with another civilization that is the Mangueira Hill.’⁶ What emerges from both quotations is that Oiticica himself embarked on this irreversible process of (self) marginalisation, leaving to posterity the myth of the marginal artist. Oiticica felt no doubt divided between two opposed cultures, the wealthy and well-educated artistic elite settled in the lowlands or on the coast of Rio de Janeiro and the marginalised Afro-Brazilian population living in the favelas at the top of the *morros*. Looking at Rio’s landscape, stretched in between slopes and high hills, and brushed by the sea, the two worlds lie close to one other but are separated by invisible social barriers which prevent any kind of communication. Oiticica placed himself in between these poles. However, I argue that he was neither marginal nor marginalised, neither as a human being nor as artist.

Oiticica was born into a wealthy family and trained in the arts at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. His father was an entomologist, his grandfather was an activist and writer and one of the places where Oiticica lived and worked while in Rio was a villa close to *Jardim Botânico* in one of Rio’s wealthiest areas. This villa now hosts his archive. These combined facts

⁵ ‘Indivíduo que vive em duas culturas em conflito, ou que, tendo-se desprendido de uma cultura, não se integrou completamente em outra, ficando à margem das duas culturas,’ Harry Laus, Oiticica: Marginal da Arte,” *Jornal do Brasil*, July 20, 1966, my translation.

⁶ ‘Isto é o que ele próprio afirma, inclusive quando divide sua vida entre o trabalho normal em um escritório e a convivência com a outra civilização que é o Morro de Mangueira,’ *ibid.*, my translation.

go to prove that he grew up in a comfortable environment. Although he did not sell anything during his lifetime but the *Metaesquemas*, he was, along with Lygia Clark, probably the most popular artist in Brazil.⁷ The volume of both Rio-based and national press recognition while he was alive is impressive. Every exhibition held in Brazil or abroad in which Oiticica took part was reviewed by at least one national newspaper; the commentary on his work was always extremely positive. Oiticica was proudly described as the Brazilian avant-garde artist par excellence; he was acknowledged as the official ambassador of Brazilian *vanguarda* abroad.

The excitement in the Brazilian press on the occasion of Oiticica's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1969 testifies to this; it was not shared to the same degree by the British press.⁸ In London, art critic Guy Brett contributed to Oiticica's success; in Brazil, one of his promoters was Frederico Moraes, champion critic of Brazilian avant-garde art and counter-culture. Nowadays Hélio Oiticica's renown greatly exceeds national limits: this is witnessed not only by the number of solo and collective shows exhibiting his work all over the world from the nineties onwards, but also by the impressive literature, including a number of monographs, recently published.⁹

Even if Oiticica's *catalogue raisonné* has not been published yet, his popularity has increased extraordinarily in the last twenty years. This has developed alongside the creation of the myth of the marginal, bohemian artist, who lived at the margins of both civil society and the artistic scene and whose

⁷ The success of the *Metaesquemas* is witnessed by the retrospective exhibition 'Metaesquemas' at the Galeria Ralph Camargo in 1972; this assumption is also based on Mari Carmen Ramírez's presentation at the conference 'Post-war Art: between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965', Munich, May 2014.

⁸ Among the articles celebrating Oiticica's success abroad see Fredrico Moraes, "Um Ditator Tropicalista em Londres," *Artes Plástica*, 12, 3; Ver Pachego Jordão, "Londrinos Apreciam Arte Jovem dos Brasileiros," *O Globo*, December 13, 1967. In London some bad reviews appeared, see for example Ed Mullins, "This other – unnecessary – Eden," *Sunday Telegraph*, March 9, 1969; Marina Vaizey, "Hélio Oiticica," *Arts: Review with Auction and Gallery Guide*, March 15, 1969, 147.

⁹ To mention only a few: *Hélio Oiticica: the Body of Colour*, Tate Modern, 1997, curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez; and the travelling exhibition *Hélio Oiticica*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 1992, curated by Guy Brett, Catherine David, Chris Decon, Luciano Figueiredo and Lygia Pape. In 2016 two monographs and two exhibitions in Chicago and London, 2016); Gonzalo Aguilar, *Hélio Oiticica: a Asa Branca do Extanse*, (Editora Rocco: Brazil, 2016); Stefanie Heraeus, *Hélio Oiticica: Curating the Penetraveis*, (Palmengarten: Frankfurt am Main, 2016); Lynn Zevelansky et al., *Hélio Oiticica: to organise delirium*, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art; Munich: Del Monico Books - Prestel, 2016).

fame increased only after a lonely and tragic death. As a study of the Brazilian press demonstrates, this was not the case: Oiticica was almost a celebrity in Brazil during his lifetime. He was certainly still quite unknown outside Brazil, but both the exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1969, the residency in New York, as well as the opportunity of participating in the show *Information* at MoMA in 1970, helped to pave his way towards international recognition.¹⁰

Manzoni shares with Oiticica a similar afterlife, being labelled as a marginal and bohemian artist. As if to confirm one part of Pollock's argument, Manzoni has become very popular following the publication of a *catalogue raisonné* in 1991, edited by Freddy Battino and Luca Palazzoli.¹¹ In 2004 another very comprehensive monograph edited by Germano Celant was published.¹² Like Oiticica, Manzoni, born into a noble family, received an extensive Catholic education having studied at the Jesuit College Leone XIII in Milan. He then went to university to pursue a degree first in law and then philosophy, dropping both courses after around a year. Thanks to his family he was close to the Milanese artistic élite from the time of his adolescence.

However, from an attentive reading of the press, it emerges that, unlike Oiticica, Manzoni never found favour with the critics during his lifetime. For example, despite the article written in 1963 which praised the artist after his death, author and critic Giorgio Kaiserlian had castigated Manzoni harshly earlier on in his career about both the exhibition 'Manzoni-Sordini-Verga' at the Gallery Pater in Milan 1957 and the manifesto 'Art is not true creation'.¹³ Art historian Gregory Tentler has blamed Kaiserlian for having undermined

¹⁰ Oiticica's fame abroad feature several articles in the foreign press: Mario Barata, "L'Art Actuel au Brésil," *Aujourd'hui*, 46, July 1964, 60-63; "Metamorphosis 1965: glass 'bolide' by Hélio Oiticica," *Signals*, June-July 1965, 11; David Medalla, "Space Suit by Fischer, Parangolé by Oiticica," *Signals*, August-September-October 1965, 14; Pierre Restany, "L'Arte in Brasile, nelle Sabbie Mobili," *Domus*, 544, March 1975, n.p. He also exhibited six *Parangolés* at Paris Biennial in 1967 and in Tokyo the same year.

¹¹ Freddy Battino, Luca Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné*, (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1991).

¹² Germano Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale*, (Milano: Skirà, 2004). The first general catalogue was actually released in 1975, curated by Germano Celant and edited by Prearo and it was then republished in 1989.

¹³ Giorgio Kaiserlian, "In ricordo di Piero Manzoni," in *D'Ars Agency*, May-June 1963, 108-113; Giorgio Kaiserlian, "Manzoni, Sordini, e Verga," *Il Popolo di Milano*, June 5, 1957, quoted in Gregory Tentler, "Without expensive transport or the bother of customs," 98.

Manzoni's future reception.¹⁴ However, I argue that Kaisserlian's (bad) reviews actually acted in Manzoni's favour: firstly they acknowledged him as an 'artist' and, secondly, they legitimised his connection to a specific trend – the Nuclear movement.

Manzoni's early critical reception constituted a double-edged sword. On the one hand it prevented his artworks from receiving the appreciation they deserve; on the other, it gave Manzoni the chance to exploit the media for his own popularity. Following a process similar to Oiticica's (self) marginalisation, Manzoni presented himself as the *enfant terrible* of the arts, a nonconformist outsider who refused to align himself to a specific trend or party. Manzoni's nonconformist attitude is displayed, for example, in the amusing photograph that portrays the artist in a toilet, proudly holding a can of his *Artist's Shit*.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, art critics began to understand Manzoni's oeuvre only after his death. Artist Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) constitutes the most significant exception: he had been a great admirer of Manzoni's from his exhibition at the Gallery Pater in 1957 up until his death. Fontana also bought one of Manzoni's *Lines* after the show at Albisola Marina in 1959.¹⁶ Interviewed by Tommaso Trini a few days before his death Fontana declared:

In spite of all that the Americans are doing today they still haven't caught up with Manzoni. Manzoni's *Line* is still way ahead of them. (...) Manzoni's *Line* as concept or as social motivation of art has not yet been reached by anybody because of its infinity.¹⁷

Nancy Spector acknowledges the exclusion of Manzoni from American criticism as a 'temporary blindness'. Benjamin Buchloh recalls the same critical failure in his review of Manzoni's large-scale retrospective in 2009 at the Gagosian Gallery in New York.¹⁸

¹⁴ Gregory Tentler, "Without expensive transport or the bother of customs," 99.

¹⁵ The photograph was taken by ØLe Bagger in Manzoni's house in via Fiori Chiari, Milan.

¹⁶ See "Vandali (dal Diario di Milano, rubrica: Accade di tutto)," *Il Giorno*, September 5, 1959, 9.

¹⁷ *The last interview given by Fontana* (selection from a conversation with Lucio Fontana recorded by Tommaso Trini on 19 July 1968), in Studio International, November 1972, p. 164.

¹⁸ Nancy Spector, "Piero Manzoni and United States: a temporary blindness," in German Celant, ed., *Piero Manzoni*, (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1991), 39; Benjamin Buchloh, "Manzoni: A Retrospective," *Artforum International*, 2009, 160.

If the study of the Brazilian press of the sixties and seventies reveals an extraordinary openness towards the avant-garde and a great appreciation of the practice of Oiticica and his fellow artists, the survey of reviews and articles published in Italy during Manzoni's lifetime has a dual outcome. Firstly, as Enrico Baj said, it clearly shows that 'at that time everybody had it in for Manzoni'.¹⁹ Secondly, it demonstrates that the kind of criticism dominating the Italian press at the end of the fifties was a tabloid-like criticism. These journalists were obviously more keen on provoking sensation than presenting to the public an accurate art-historical analysis. Moreover, as Francesca Gramegna has pointed out, Manzoni fuelled a controversy against (locally based) art critics, as testified in a letter to Enrico Baj.²⁰ The protest mentioned in the letter was never realised, but in 1957 Manzoni was excluded from the San Fedele Art Prize. He contested this expulsion by arranging a sort of *salon de refusées*²¹ at the Bar Jamaica, close to Brera in Milan and by publishing a flyer against critics and art institutions.²² Despite a difficult start, Manzoni is now one of the most renowned and praised Italian artists of the twentieth century: like Oiticica, the last decade or so has witnessed a considerable number of new publications and exhibitions which present Manzoni as an extraordinarily under-appreciated genius – in line with Pollock's argument.²³

¹⁹ Enrico Baj, *Automitobiografia*, (Milano : Rizzoli, 1983) 153.

²⁰ 'Baj ed io abbiamo pensato di organizzare qui a Milano una grossa e violenta manifestazione contro la critica d'arte o meglio contro certi suoi aspetti. (...) Questa l'occasione: la manifestazione sarà grossa e scandalistica, con polizia ecc...: abbiamo scritto a Jorn, a Klein: fammi sapere immediatamente se possiamo contare su di te. La faccenda dovrà essere veramente colossale.' Piero Manzoni, letter to Enrico Baj, 1957, quoted in Francesca Gramegna, "'Una grossa e violenta manifestazione contro la critica d'arte': il carteggio fra Enrico Baj e Piero Manzoni nella Milano degli anni Cinquanta,' *ARTES*, 13, 2005-2007, 9-10.

²¹ "Exhibition of young artists at Bar Giamaiaca," Milan, Bar Giamaiaca, 9 November 1957; the participants were: Guido Biasi, Aldo Calvi, Silvio Pasotti, Antonio Recalcati, Ettore Sordini, Anglo Verga, Alberto Zilocchi. Manzoni exhibited two artworks of the Nuclear period: *L'invincibile Jean* and *Abilene*.

²² See Giorgio Kasserlian, "In ricordo di Piero Manzoni," *D'Ars Agency*, 3, 4, 1963, 19.

²³ Luigi Gaspare Marcone, ed., *Piero Manzoni: Achrome, Linea infinita* (London and Torino: Mazzoleni, 2016); Flaminio Gualdoni, *Piero Manzoni: an artist's life* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016); Guido Andrea Patuasso, *Piero Manzoni: divorare l'arte* (Milano: Electa, 2015). In 2014 a big retrospective was held at Palazzo Reale in Milan; the publication of a catalogue (Milano: Skira, 2014) and a DVD narrating Manzoni's life went alongside it. Moreover, that year and the year before witnessed the publication of previously unpublished material like Manzoni's diary (ed. Luigi Gaspare Marcone, Milano: Electa, 2013) and his writings (ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone, Milano: Abscondita, 2013).

To summarise, Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica currently share a similar ‘mythical’ resurgence that confers upon them an incredible popularity at an international level. This recent acclaim for both possesses certain features: Oiticica has been labelled as the marginal artist, at the margins of both the arts and society; Manzoni has been portrayed as the (in)famous *enfant terrible* who was excluded from the artistic scene. The survey of the press of their time reveals interesting hints on these matters: firstly that, if we understand marginality as exclusion from the arts or as critical misfortune, then Oiticica was not marginal at all. Every collective or solo show in Brazil or abroad was precisely recorded and praised by the national press. Several of his writings were published in monthly reviews or newspapers, testifying to his popularity. Oiticica also had the chance to work abroad: he became famous in London in the sixties because of his association with the artistic collective ‘Exploding Galaxy’ founded by David Medalla, and thanks also to the support of Guy Brett. During his eight years in New York, he was able to get acquainted with Jack Smith’s experimental cinema that greatly influenced his mixed media works.²⁴ However, Oiticica was never commercially successful during his lifetime: the only works sold were the *Metaesquamas* produced during his collaboration with the Neo-Concrete movement.

Manzoni had a different fate. Firstly, the amount of articles and reviews published during his lifetime is probably one-tenth the amount of those that mention Oiticica. This has obvious biographical causes – Manzoni died at twenty-nine, Oiticica at forty-three – but it also proves that they had a different critical reception. As stated above, Manzoni did not benefit from the favourable appraisal of the critical establishment until the very last months of his career. In an article from 1963, artist Emilio Tadini classified Italian art critics into three different categories: those who completely rejected the avant-garde as a whole for being ‘a corruption of the arts’; those who considered the avant-garde trend as out-dated; and those who were in a constant dialogue with the new avant-garde artistic practices.²⁵ The majority of the critics who

²⁴ Oiticica was close to Brazilian Cinema Novo, having taken part in Glaube Rocha’s *Cancer* (1972).

²⁵ Emilio Tadini, “L’Organicità del Reale,” *Il Verri*, 12, 1963, 12.

monopolised Italian newspapers in the second half of the fifties belonged to the first category. Abroad, Manzoni experienced better fortune: he was affiliated with both the Dutch *Nul* group (from 1958) and with the German *Zero* group (from 1959); he exhibited with *New Tendencies* in Zagreb (3 August - 14 September 1961) and lived in Denmark for a couple of months in 1961. Cleverly promoting himself and his work, Manzoni was able to get in touch with the most important artists and art dealers in Europe – Hans Sonnenberg in Holland, Arthur Kopcke in Denmark, Iris Clert in Paris. He therefore exhibited in and organised important international shows, thus proving himself not to be an ‘outsider’.

Ultimately, whether or not these artists can be portrayed as marginal depends on how ‘marginality’ is defined; some of its nuances make the term unsuitable for Manzoni and Oiticica. Moreover, an attentive historiographical analysis of the newspapers of their time, compared with current secondary literature, has revealed how current critical theory has prompted a misleading reception of these artists. I therefore hope that my own and other paths of research prompt the rethinking of the value of historiography for a new understanding of the art from the last half of the twentieth century and that the value of transcending regional frameworks will be replicated in later studies and taken in novel directions.

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